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# THE RELIGIOUS LIFE OF INDIA

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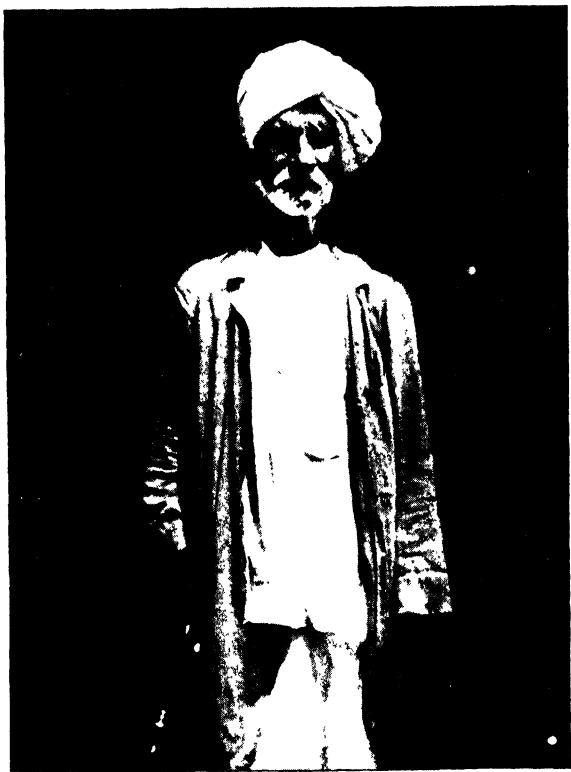
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## EDITORIAL PREFACE

THE purpose of this series of small volumes on the leading forms which religious life has taken in India is to produce really reliable information for the use of all who are seeking the welfare of India. Editors and writers alike desire to work in the spirit of the best modern science, looking only for the truth. But, while doing so and seeking to bring to the interpretation of the systems under review such imagination and sympathy as characterize the best study in the domain of religion today, they believe they are able to shed on their work fresh light drawn from the close religious intercourse which they have each had with the people who live by the faith herein described; and their study of the relevant literature has in every instance been largely supplemented by persistent questioning of those likely to be able to give information. In each case the religion described is brought into relation with Christianity. It is believed that all readers, in India at least, will recognise the value of this practical method of bringing out the salient features of Indian religious life.



GABBAN-MAHAR  
(A friend of the author)

THE RELIGIOUS LIFE OF INDIA

# THE MAHAR FOLK

*A Study of Untouchables in Maharastra*

BY

ALEXANDER ROBERTSON, M.A.

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## AUTHOR'S PREFACE

Years have elapsed since Dr. J. N. Farquhar did me the honour of asking me to write an account of the Mahars. At that time my work in the Poona district had led me into many villages, and I had met people of all classes; and I thought that I knew the Mahars and their mind. But the demand for a written word about them showed me that much special study and research were required to fulfil Dr. Farquhar's desire. I regret that I was never able to submit any of my work on this subject to him.

From time to time the staff of the Scottish Church in Poona was called on to help at other stations; and so there came to me the privilege of serving in Kolaba, Ahmednagar and Nagpur. That made possible wide research among the Mahar people; and the more one searched the more there remained to investigate. And so the writing out in full of the knowledge thus gained was long delayed; and many of my Mahar friends must have lost hope of ever seeing in print what they had helped me to glean of folklore. I had myself lost hope of publishing my study when five years in a drawer began to make some of the facts mouldy. But the Rev. J. Z. Hodge of the National Christian Council showed a most helpful interest in the publication; and by his efforts my studies are now set up in type. I am most grateful to Mr. Hodge.

My indebtedness to books for information about the Mahars is acknowledged throughout in footnotes. For the understanding of the folk poetry and for the discovery of old charters I am specially under obligation to Mr. Manohar Uzgara and to the Rev. Sumitra Thorat of Poona. Much help was given generously by Mr. Kamble of Poona and Martandrao Master of Saswad. The late Rev. Vinayakrao Uzgara helped me in the Ahmednagar district. My gratitude

to these and many other helpers has not faded with the years.

Questions regarding customs, legends and cult have often remained unanswered; and I feel that much of scientific interest has yet to be gleaned. If any readers can supplement or correct my information I shall be glad to receive fuller knowledge. It has to be remembered, however, that the far spread fragments of this people cannot be easily cemented together for the formulation of uniform tribal custom and belief.

It is impossible to study a people so mishandled by fate as the Mahars have been without feeling pity for them, and indignation towards the system which oppressed them. Such emotion often warps scientific judgment. But moral indignation is one of the facts which science must explain. If I do seem to advocate warmly the claim of the Mahar for justice, it is because the facts have shown that the claim is reasonable. If I seem very hard on Brahmanism in its treatment of the outcaste, I am not just airing an individual opinion or even repeating the opinions of anti-Brahmanic classes. Many of my closest friends have been Brahmans, and they have helped me to understand that the best in their life and their literature condemns the absurdities of the caste system.

Some matters are necessarily dealt with in a general way and the lack of particular treatment may cause obscurity. For example, I have found that words like 'outcaste' and 'untouchable' perplex many people in Britain. Why should any person be born outcaste and why should the touch of a clean, decent man bring defilement? Why indeed? "It's gey an easy spairin." If one were dealing with the whole Hindu social system one might go into detail; but that would demand extensive treatment. I am just seeking to show what kind of people constitute the chief outcaste class in the Maratha country. This may help to throw light on the whole social order which is dominated by Brahmanic belief and custom; and I hope it may help to put matters right that are wrong.

In a similar way there may be obscurity in my references to the religion whose centre is Pandharpur. If one were

dealing specially with India's doctrine of salvation by God's sovereign grace it would be necessary to treat historically, and with much attention to an extensive vernacular literature, the whole Bhagavata Dharma which flourished at Pandharpur as in other centres in India. In the present essay I must just take for granted that there has been a great revelation of God's grace at Pandharpur; and I have sought to interpret to those who do not understand the Marathi language the nature of the contribution made by Mahars to the praise of the Name.

My hope is that this essay may contribute something in its incompleteness to an understanding of the social order in India and of the soul of that great land.

*The Manse of Kilmallie,  
Corpach  
by Fort William,  
September, 1938.*

ALEXANDER ROBERTSON.



## PREFACE

THE Depressed Classes of India, or the 'Harijans'—to give them the new name bestowed on them by Mahatma Gandhi—have in recent years acquired an importance which thirty years ago one would not have believed to be possible. People have known about untouchability for as long as they have known about Hinduism, and many have regarded it as a disease like plague or cholera for the fighting of which all true lovers of men should use every means at their command. But the average man or woman had little detailed knowledge of the life of the Untouchables, and what they had related very largely to the more striking disabilities and injustices to which they were subjected. The Untouchables themselves were inarticulate. They had neither education, nor wealth, nor social or political influence. In any movement which affected them the initiative had to come from without.

In recent years a great change has taken place. These outcaste people have come into possession of considerable political power. As a class and as communities their self-consciousness is growing. They are resenting their disabilities and claiming for themselves the right to a fuller and freer life. They are organizing themselves, and there are appearing among them leaders, some of whom are men of outstanding ability. The attention of the people of India has been directed to them in a new way, and there has been a real awakening of conscience in regard to them. It is impossible to forecast what the outcome of all this will be. In these days almost everything in India is changing, and the future of these unfortunate people will certainly be very different in many ways from their past.

The Mahars are one of the most important of these communities in Western India. They have received special prominence recently through the resolution which a Con-

ference of members of the community, led by Dr. Ambedkar, passed at Yeola, pledging themselves to leave Hinduism. People have been led to ask what manner of people these are. Mr. Robertson in this very important little book answers the question. He has special qualifications for this task. He has just retired from India after having lived for thirty-five years in Maharastra. He worked first as a missionary in Poona District, and later as Professor of Philosophy in Hislop College, Nagpur. In both these districts, as well as in other parts of Western India, he came into intimate contact with large groups of Mahars. He came to know them as a friend. It is this fact that gives to his study its peculiar value, for he has brought to bear on his task not only that capacity for observation of which only a trained mind is capable, but a deep sympathy with and love for the people. He presents the Mahar to us not as a mere object of scientific interest, but as a man; and as a man possessing all the worth and dignity, and all the capacity for practical, intellectual and spiritual attainment, that are found in other members of God's great family. May this book lead to a greater understanding of this remarkable community, and to a greater sympathy with them and with other under-privileged communities in their aspirations.

JOHN MCKENZIE.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

‘WHEREVER there is a town there is a Mahar quarter.’<sup>1</sup> So runs in literal translation a common Marathi saying. This proverb is used idiomatically to convey a meaning very different from the literal one: it is used where in English one would say, ‘There is a black sheep in every flock.’ From this idiom it appears that the ordinary speaker of the Marathi tongue puts into the name ‘Mahar’ a tone of contempt; and even many of the Mahar people themselves betray diffidence and shame when they confess that they are members of this more than outcaste race. And when people of Mahar extraction establish themselves as honourable members of the Christian society they are often reluctant to put any emphasis on their origin. In other words the name Mahar has retained for them its abusive tone.

In former days a Mahar meeting a man of higher caste would use the form of greeting peculiar to his people—*Johar*, *mayabapa*, *Johar*—and it would be unnecessary to enquire who he was. But one has noticed of late years a tendency on the part of men of this caste to use the greeting affected by the Marathas in opposition to the Islamic ‘salaam,’ and when one enquires regarding their caste, as one may do quite politely, they try to put one off with the statement that they are ‘Hindus.’ The use of that word marks an interesting stage in their sense of self respect. Forgetting utterly, as most people do forget, the original introduction of the word Hindu<sup>2</sup> by the Moghal conquerors of the Deccan, they have

<sup>1</sup> जेथें गांव तेथें महारवाडा.

<sup>2</sup> हिंदू = In Persian black as, e.g., Abyssinians.

been claiming by its use their right to be included in that social and religious system which is championed by the Hindu Mahasabha. But events have been moving with great rapidity of late; and many of those who a few years back were anxious for entry into Brahmanical temples have been thinking of severing their connexion with the 'Hindu' fold.

Into the mental turmoil caused by the claim on the part of the so-called untouchables to the privileges of Brahmanism, Mahatma Gandhi has thrown a bone of further contention by gathering all the untouchables under one kindly name, the Harijan. The word Harijan carries much of the meaning of the almost technical word, Haridas, the slave of God. The Harijan or Haridas is the man, or woman even, who attains salvation by the free grace of God appropriated by faith. All kinds and conditions of people have been saved by grace, robbers like Nama and harlots like Kanhopatra, unbusiness-like merchants like Tukaram and gifted Brahmins like Ekanath and Ramdas. This salvation by the free grace of Hari is just parallel to the Christianity in which Augustine of Hippo and Martin Luther and John Newton found peace and power. And we remember how this now beautiful name of Christian was first applied half in scorn by the people of Antioch, and how later it was used in pity or in fear of the devil of those poor, undeveloped people in Alpine valleys whose endocrine glands were shamelessly neglected by a stepmotherly Nature. 'Cretin' is the word formed from the French *Chrétien* used in pity of those Alpine mental defectives. No one likes the word 'Cretin,' however sincere the pity which first applied it. The Mahar's instinct is trustworthy when he objects to the word Harijan. And his instinct is stimulated by his *amour propre*. Why should he be classed with castes from which Brahmanism taught his forefathers to keep apart? It is justice that the Mahar is now claiming and not pity. And he is determined to get justice for himself even if all the world tries to deny it to him.

When one remembers the depth of poverty and the ill-fame to which Mahars as a people have been condemned, one does not wonder at any attempt on their part to suppress the name. The Marathi language represents the Mahar quarter of a town as untidy and reeking of the carcasses of dead

animals:<sup>1</sup> proverbs represent it also as a place of loud and unseemly squabbling.<sup>2</sup> The individual Mahar is often unjustly thought of as unclean in his person and clothing and therefore naturally untouchable. And when he is manifestly immaculate in his person and in his garments, as he has to be always when he is serving food in the house of a European, yet no Maratha farmer, begrimed at the end of a day of toil in dusty fields, is willing to accept a drink of pure water from a vessel handed to him by a manifestly clean Mahar, for the 'untouchability' of the caste is enjoined by the precepts of a religion which makes a mixture of races a mortal sin. The Brahman village clerk who enrolled the Mahar as a 'Hindu' in the census returns will not admit him into the sacred precincts of a Brahmanic temple. The village clerk may comment on the unreasonableness of a ceremonial order which contradicts what his most sacred book considers the spirit of wisdom. But there it is. The caste order is admittedly irrational in its essence as that appears to a Brahman endowed with knowledge. 'The Mahar is dead,' runs another proverb, 'the dirt is gone.'<sup>3</sup> Why should we worry about such matters of no moment? If we were saying a thing like that in idiomatic Marathi we should be vulgar and word it thus, 'Let the leather-worker take the Mahar's mother.'<sup>4</sup> The concerns of people so depraved and so abandoned by Fate are not for gentle folk to consider. 'Hens and goats are not wealth, Mahars and Mangs are not castes.'<sup>5</sup>

It is doubtful whether the Marathi language can afford any longer to be disrespectful of the Mahar and those sections of the population without the pale of which he is the greater part. But is it any concern of the spirit which

<sup>1</sup> हाडोळा or हाडोळी literally = a place of bones but is used for the inam land given to Mahars in return for their services to the village.

<sup>2</sup> महार कचका = Mahar squabbling.

<sup>3</sup> महार मेळामळ गेला.

<sup>4</sup> महाराची आई चांभार घेवो.

<sup>5</sup> कौवडे वकरें धन नाहीत महार मांग जात नाहीत.

inspires the English tongue to attend to those who have been lower than slaves?

The answer to questions of that sort is not difficult to give. If any Maratha despises the name Mahar he is forgetful of Maratha history and ignorant of Marathi literature and of the essence of the faith which is the highest ornament of Maharashtra. Nor ought the British people to forget the history in the making of which the Mahars and the other outcastes which they represent have played a heroic part.

When British women needed help to run their households in the land of the Marathas they found the despised Mahar an efficient house servant and his wife an equally skilful and trustworthy children's nurse. The administrator found the Mahar a mine of reliable information on the affairs of the villages. He was found to have a capacity for the skilful handling of horses. The merchant adventurer who in days now far off had to keep the peace in the interests of his trade, got from outcastes like the Mahar a police and a military service which was worthy of chivalrous comradeship. There is a grey monumental obelisk at Koregaon, fourteen miles from Poona on the Ahmednagar road, which keeps fresh the memory of that comradeship; and a tablet affixed to a wall on Waudby Road, Bombay, tells a similar story to the wayfarer who understands Marathi names. There are many, however, of the present generation of British folk in Maharashtra who have never learned to think of the foundations on which their comforts are established. It is always the thing most common and most essential in experience which is least attended to. Most of the ayahs in European homes in a city like Poona are of the Mahar caste, and most of the waiters and butlers in the best clubs and homes are of this same caste. The masters and the mistresses may not know, because they have never enquired; and in some cases they have not enquired, because they would not understand the intricacies of caste.

The student of Marathi literature finds the Mahar enjoying amid the poet saints of Pandharpur a respect which proverbs and social degradation cannot dim. Faithfulness and heroism and religious devotion are not excellences that appear accidentally in a people; and the tracing of their rise

and growth is demanded by the kindred excellence of justice. The Mahar needs an advocate for the establishment of his own self-respect and for the interpretation even to his own countrymen of his claims to justice at least. That advocacy may well take form in a language which understands freedom and friendliness as kindred words, and at the hand of one who is himself as much an outsider to the Brahman as the Mahar is. The unfailing friend of the lowly is Pandurang. He is the advocate of the lordless, and in His Name one of his Mahars may well espouse the cause of the outcaste.

There lives a quaint tale from the days when Moghal adventurers ruled the whole Deccan. The governor of a province enquired of his Brahman secretary which of the many castes in the land was commonly counted the lowest. The clerk, answering that he would make enquiries and then let his master know, proceeded stealthily to the Mahar quarter and informed the elders that the governor was thinking of making them into Moslems. Thereupon all the Mahars went in a body to the governor's gate, and raised their voices in lamentation, saying, 'Punish us in any way you please, Maharaj; but do not force us to become Moslems.'

That wise and honoured administrator, Major-General Sir John Malcolm, records a similar story in connexion with the objection which Brahman clerks used to have to the employment of Mahar sepoys in close proximity to the water-supply which they used. 'These cowardly fellows of Brahmans,' said an able and old Konkanese subhedar I was conversing with on this point, 'who would not look at me, and would degrade a brave man of my caste (a Purwaree) by refusing to let him stand sentry over the treasury, if in a cutcherry would cringe and help the collector to his shoe if it fell off, and would consider themselves the more honoured the nearer he sat to them, and yet I believe,' said the old man laughing, 'you Feringees are, according to their belief, as unclean and impure as we Purwarees.'<sup>1</sup>

But the night of prejudice is passing. There are many Brahmans of the true order who are anxious to give the Mahar and other outcastes that place in the esteem of India

<sup>1</sup> Malcolm, *Government of India*, p. 235.

for which individuals may fit themselves. There have always been from of old among the saints of Pandurang some Brahmans of the true order, and their voice calls for attention across the centuries. Besides, the outcastes themselves throughout India are now clamouring in no uncertain voice for opportunity for social advancement and for recognition as citizens of a free state. In this battle for rights a position of advantage which the past never offered has been given to the outcastes in the political attempt to frame a constitution for the New India. Dr. Ambedkar, a fully educated gentleman who belongs to the class of ceremonially untouchables, has represented them at the Round Table Conference in London, and he has been playing a leading part in negotiation with Mahatma Gandhi on the questions of admitting untouchables into temples and of giving them an adequate enfranchisement in the new constitution. The recent trend of political forces has placed Mahatma Gandhi at the focus of public attention, and he has concentrated all the rays of light which liberal minded men have been turning on the evils of untouchability, and in response to his advocacy some temple doors are being opened to the outcastes. Their political status, with their religious status is among the most pressing questions of the day. It is surely worthwhile to attempt to understand these questions in the light of history and of all the facts. This study, though concentrated on a fraction of the outcaste millions, may shed some light on the general question of caste and untouchability and on the moral and religious issues involved in those questions.

## CHAPTER II

### THE MAHAR IN THE VILLAGE ECONOMY

WHEN a traveller approaches a walled village in the Deccan he finds groups of huts outside the gate. And if there be no walls, these groups of mean houses are set well apart from the village proper. On enquiry he finds that these are the dwellings of untouchable people, the Mahars being the chief group. In the Deccan the Mahar *wada* is found almost invariably on the East of the village proper. If in any place it be found on another direction point, as at Indapur in the Poona district where it is on the south, an explanation may be found in the line of the natural drainage of the land. The Mahar wada is always on the lower side of the town. If the flow of the prevailing wind be considered as well as the flow of the water, the east side of the village is usually the lower side in the Deccan.

But the flow of air and water cannot be the whole explanation of the orientation of the Mahar wada in the Deccan; for the rule of its eastern orientation does not hold in villages of the Central Provinces where Mahars are more numerous than they are in the Deccan and where their occupation is more varied. Indeed in some old places in the Central Provinces, as at Dhapewada in the Soaner taluka of the Nagpur District, the separateness of the untouchables is not so marked as to strike a stranger. In the cities which draw people from many districts for industry and administration, this separation cannot be maintained. In the city of Poona there are from ancient times three groups of Mahars living at different parts of the city; and Europeans are there the dwellers of the East end. In the city of Nagpur Europeans are found as West Enders. In those cities immigrant Mahars are now found on all sides wherever they can find convenient room.

The Mahar of every class and of every occupation is untouchable, that is to say, none of the twice-born classes of Hindus can touch him or be touched by him without contracting ceremonial uncleanness; and there is no entry for him into the shrines of the gods which are worshipped by those Hindus. A Mahar cannot enter the house of a twice-born man without carrying defilement into it. In the neighbourhood of Nagpur a well which has been dug by Mahar labour will not be used by the higher castes, if the Mahar labourers worked down to the water level. There does not seem to be a parallel objection to the use of houses which have been built by Mahar masons and labourers. When a visitor enters a village school he may see a group of boys squatting on the verandah though their class may be at work inside a room. And even in the classes of some high schools a visitor may find a couple of boys sitting on a bench apart from the general arrangement of benches. The visitor may observe the teacher passing a book or a cane to one of those boys by throwing the article on the ground before the boy may grasp it. The visitor to village schools in the earlier days of the last century sometimes found a heap of clods of earth in a corner of the schoolroom. These were used by the teacher when he wished to administer punishment to a low caste child: a clod was flung at the boy.

Untouchable and nameless though he be the Mahar is an indispensable part of the village organization in so far as he is employed in the execution of village duties. And there are certain duties which by village law and custom throughout Maharashtra can only be performed by men of this caste. There are rights and privileges connected with the performance of these duties of a social and religious nature whose roots are deep in the unknown past.

The position of the Mahar in the village community can be understood fully only if the matter be regarded from the historical point of view; for his standing has varied from time to time; and at the present day his legal status is undergoing change.

In all matters that concern the social and religious standing of any adherent of the Brahmanical system it is necessary to start with the Vedic literature if one is to trace their genesis.



But it is very doubtful whether any appeal by a Mahar to the Vedic practice of using a *sudra* in ceremonies such as the Mahavrata, or to the Upanisada story of how Satyakama, the son of a slave girl, Jabala, attained the highest knowledge; or to the epic generosity which permits honour to be given to a learned *sudra*, avails any; for the Mahar is considered *atisudra* (*infra* slave), he is *antyaja* (the last born), he is *anamika* (nameless). There is no trace in the present Mahar position of any organic functional relation to Brahmanism, ancient or mediæval, as there is in the need of the Mang, the natural enemy of the Mahar, in certain Brahmanical rites. If, indeed, the burning of the dead or the kindling of the Holy Fire be essentially Brahmanical ceremonies, then the Mahar may have some ancient relation to Brahmanism.

If the question be raised why the Mahar is classed as *atisudra*, the answer depends on pure hypothesis. It is, perhaps, sufficient to answer that the Marathas, even the Maratha kings of Sivaji's line, and certainly the Kunbis, were counted *sudra*. That this was the customary view of those castes at the beginning of British rule in India is revealed in the writings of impartial Englishmen such as Sir John Malcolm. It is well authenticated that the great founder of the Maratha Empire, Sivaji Bhonsle, was invested with the sacred thread only after his assumption of regal power, and that the investiture was carried out on the ground of his mother's descent from Rajput princes. And to this day the leaders of orthodox Brahmanical thought and practice in Maharashtra do not admit the right of scions of Sivaji's house to the symbol of the twice-born. If the Marathas and the Kunbis were considered *sudra*, it is natural enough that those far below them in standing and to them unclean, should be *atisudra*. And thus the term is applied to Mahars, Mangs and Chambhars; and it presents a reproof to all who claim consideration from Brahmanism on the plea that the ancient *sudra* possessed certain rights.

Seeing that the Mahar is found almost exclusively where the Marathi language is spoken and that he is without Sanskrit culture, the study of the history of his place in the village community must be confined to the limits of Marathi literature.

Ancient and mediæval historians in India, even more than in the lands of Europe, seem to have been lamentably unaware of the importance to human life of the ordinary man. Thus the historians deal mostly with kings and their courtiers. But here and there in Marathi literature, as in other literatures, one comes upon allusions and metaphors and allegories wherein the life of the common man is reflected fitfully. It is by the study of such passages that one is able to construct a genetic picture of the Mahar's standing and function in the village economy.

Earliest and perhaps foremost in the literary evidence for the standing of the Mahar in the village community are the poems attributed by tradition to Chokhamela and his family, a group of poets of this caste who flourished at the beginning of the fourteenth century. Their poems show the Mahar as engaged in menial occupations, as receiving the leavings of food in answer to their begging or as their perquisite, as being persecuted by those in authority in the temples, as being kept at a distance by all, and as defiling food by their touch. And yet Chokhamela and his group are initiated into a great religious fellowship by teachers whose succession they name. Their confession of ignorance of sacred literature does not nullify the fact that their own literary compositions have been preserved. Were they able to use the art of writing not only in the composition of their hymns but also in the mastery of village records and of the debts due to the village rulers? Mahipati<sup>1</sup> preserves the tradition that Anantabhata, a Brahman, used to do the writing of Chokhamela. Village debts and records, even at the present day, can be carried in a practised and retentive memory.

Among the short poems attributed to Dnyaneshwar there is one metaphorical piece representing a Mahar as speaking of his own experience and duties. If the piece was composed by the author of the *Dnyaneshwari* it reflects village life at the end of the thirteenth century. It runs as follows:

'Greeting (*johara*) O my parents, greeting. I am *pandewara* of Master Krishna's house. All the business of his house is on my head, so please ye, O my parents. An officer

<sup>1</sup> *Bhaktivijaya*, xxi, 209.

(named) Squire Desire oppressed the tenants by robbing them. Mr. Anger became a revenue collector, and the king's business was entrusted to him. Thus Passion was troubled. Squire Mind fomented treachery, and anarchy began. The whole town fell into a state of ruin, so please you, O my parents. Master Will was headman of Bodytown under Mistress Kindness. Mr. Self had there a pleasant time, so please you, O my parents. The thought of those two dominated the place; therefore I became angry, and I besought Master Will to keep in check his youngsters, O my parents. To Nivritti I make obeisance. To Deva the world bore fruit, so please you, O my parents.'

The authorship of this poem is not a matter of much moment. It would be useful to know the date of its composition, but in this matter all we can certainly say is that it must belong to a period when the Moghals had established their influence in North India if not in the Deccan; for some of the words in the poem are Persian in origin. It was necessary in those generations as in the present for the pilgrim to Northern shrines to use the Hindi language. Through that language Persian and Arabic words may have filtered into literary use in Marathi even before the Moghals established their rule in the Deccan. The vocabulary of this poem is laden with information regarding the standing of the pandewara. This officer, though humble, is yet in a position of responsibility: he is factor in charge of all his master's affairs. And he speaks boldly to the face of the headman of Bodytown. The name, pandewara, is now used of the village Mahar and it must have been so used at the time of the poem's composition if the greeting '*Johar*' was then used only by Mahars. The word is old; and one sees in it a connexion of the phrase, *pandharicaḍola*, the eye of the village community. The word is used again by the poet, Tukaram, in a phrase which refers to the legend of how the god Vitthala became manager of the affairs of Damaji; and it is used later still by Mahipati in the sense of a messenger.<sup>1</sup>

This poem, with its figure of the human individual as a town is typical of a number of poems written by one who is

<sup>1</sup> *Bhaktavijaya*, xl, 109.

counted a reincarnation of Dnyaneshwar, by Ekanath who flourished in the last quarter of the sixteenth century. At that time the Moghals were established in power at Devagiri, the modern Daulatabad. Ekanath, though a Brahmana, and a learned one at that, was not ashamed to apply to himself the name, Mahar in the service of Vitthala, the Lord of the lowly. His *johar* poems, as they may be designated because of the phrase which opens each one of them—*johara Mayabapa johara*—throw a flood of light on the place of the Mahar in the village of that date, if we may believe that the metaphorical language would have no force unless it corresponded to an actual situation known to the hearers of the verses. These johar poems are too many to be quoted at length; but certain lines must be reproduced as affording contemporary evidences which one seeks in vain in the chronicles of the kings.

‘I am the Mahar of the Eternal City. I do obeisance. O Sir Patil, your wife has committed an overweening act in this your domain. All the tenants are in revolt, and the officers are of uncertain mind.’

‘I am the Mahar in the town Formless. ’Tis I that manage the affairs of the assembly of the saints. I am beloved of the Master: he trusts me. I am come in the service of my Master. I sweep up the four Vedas. I collect the sweepings of the six sciences. I gather all the ancient chronicles (*purana*) and bring them to the quarter of the saints.’

‘I am there a servant, attending to his affairs, high and low. When I awake in the morning I ask Sitabai for my rations. I sweep the hall of audience, and throw out the sweepings. As Ramji is coming to the town I go into his presence and give him the news.’

‘I am the bastard Mahar, son of Sadguru Saheb. ’Tis I who do the work of sweeping the hall of audience and paying the bills. I get up early. I receive the news of all the tenants and come to tell it to my lord. Listen so please you, O my parents. All the rents and taxes have been paid. All are talking of the lord. The village prospers under the rule of the lord.’

‘I am the Mahar of Vithu Patil. As his subordinate I render an account of the expended cash, so please you, O my

parents. Returning from the transplanting of rice I beg half a bannock and eat it. All the night I keep awake beside a cowdung fire. I make proclamation, so please you, O my parents. The farmer's plough, the merchant's weight, the women's bangles—all my faculties are employed in this business. Here. Put the town clerk into my custody: we need a true account.'

These poems contain a few more references of interest, such as the names, Atmanaka and Vitthunaka, showing the termination—*nak* as then in use to mark the Mahar. Mention is made of the *deshpande* and of the *deshmukh* and of the *kulkarni*, titles which persist to the present day as surnames. The inferences which seem legitimate deductions from Ekanath's figures of speech are:—(1) Though there are officers such as *Deshpande* and *Deshmukh*, yet the village seems to be more or less autonomous under the *patil* in whose service the Mahar holds a position of honour and trust. (2) Then as now women were sources of trouble, and jealousies, and rapacity and pride caused division and anarchy; and dishonest accounting was common. (3) This condition of affairs gave the Mahar heaps of work. Some of his duties are lowly—the sweeping of the courthouse, the sitting all night on watch by a fire of glowing cowdung; and the reward for these lowly duties was an allowance of grain or mostly dry bread left over from the master's meal. But there are also duties which demand high intelligence and moral character—the accounts kept by the town clerk must be scrutinised, the taxes must be levied justly; and a correct news report must be laid each morning before the *patil*. Mahar women as well as men had community work to do, and they sometimes bore illegitimate children to men of the ruling class. The Mahar was a necessary and useful servant; but for all that he was outcaste. Though Ekanath himself befriended men of this caste to the extent of dining with them, there are poems in which he finds it necessary to be at pains to show that the outcaste is often an intimate friend of God. This is specially his concern in the poems dealing with the memory of Chokhamela. The implication is that the grace of God is magnified in His love for those whom no other would touch, much less befriend.

In the poems quoted so far the foreign Moslem power forms a background; and one wonders how far Islam brought the spirit of freedom and fair play into the village administration. We note that there were boys in the Mahar wada whose fathers were Moslem gentlemen. It is surely significant that the Mahar enters the courthouse to sweep its floor. Was that because the judge was a Moslem? Chokhoba in his day was not allowed to cross the threshold of the temple at Pandharpur; and the Mahar does not enter right into the patil's house at the present day. In this connexion there is, surely, significance in the tradition current among the Mahars of the Deccan that they owe many of their privileges to Akbar. By the name, Akbar, they seem to mean Moghal emperors; for some of the records of their rights are dated earlier than the reign of the Great Moghal. Further significance attaches to the fact that Mahars in the Deccan not only refuse to eat the flesh of the pig, but they even refrain from uttering the name of that animal, whereas some sections of the caste in the Central Provinces, where Moghal rule was not much felt, use the flesh of the pig as food just as the Kunbis do.

Among the johar poems of Ekanath there is one which reveals the Mahar as at feud with the Brahman. It is impossible to say whether this feud was purely religious and social or whether it was based on economic considerations. Ekanath's poem reminds us of the priestly persecution of Chokhamela which was probably due to religious jealousy and pride as it was later in the case of Tukaram. But if the Mahar in Moghal times had often to accuse the town clerk of keeping inaccurate accounts, it is no wonder that the Brahman sought to keep the Mahar in his place. And besides, the Mahar was then as he is now the one man in the village whose brain capacity the Brahman had cause to fear. On the other hand it may have come upon the priest as guardian of the social order to give expression to thoughts which all classes in the village shared with him. It is difficult to imagine peace in a village between the guardians of Brahmanism and those who use the sacred cow as food.

The poem in which Ekanath represents a quarrel between a Brahman and a Mahar runs as follows:

'Get out, thou arrogant Mahar.'  
 'What, ho, Sir Brahman, what a word.'  
 'Who fears the wrath of thy poor sire?'  
 'Thy parents and mine own are one.'  
 'Take thou good care and speak not thus.'  
 'From out the Formless all have come.'  
 'How knowest thou the Formless one?'  
 'For Him make search within the heart.'  
 'We may not know that essence pure.'  
 'Then go and ask the saints for help.'  
 'What help among the saints is found?'  
 'The million births through them are passed.'  
 'By whom was taught to thee such lore?'  
 'By favour of Janardhana.'

This is more than a squabble between two village characters. Ekanath intends it to reveal a feud between two faiths. Why should the Mahar defend the faith of Pandurang, unless, being the lastborn, the *antyaaja*, he best magnifies in himself the grace that saves? But may there not be in the poem also an echo of a feud between two cultures? Among the poems attributed to Chokhamela there are some which voice his complaint that being low of caste he is shunned by all; and there is one which makes special mention of persecution by the priests of Vithoba's temple at Pandharpur. That poem runs as follows:

Make haste O Vitthu, do not stay thy feet.  
 The priests on any pretext beat me sore.  
 'How round thy neck is hung the rosary  
 Of God?' they say. 'Thus heaping on my head  
 Words of abuse, they cry that God by me  
 Hath been defiled, I being a Mahar.  
 O Thou who hold'st the discus, do not cast  
 Afar thy watchdog. Thou art He who giv'st  
 Double the gift that is the meed of man.  
 Clasp my hands I, Chokha, pray to God,  
 'Let not Thy wrath remain because I spake.'

That is not metaphorical poetry: it is a cry wrung out of a soul greatly wronged, where wrong is most poignantly felt. The conflict between Brahmanism and the religion of Pandharpur which Ekanath represents as the refuge of the Mahar is further indicated in a phrase which recurs again and again in his johar poems—'this is a truth not understood by Brahma and the higher gods.' The truth referred to is salvation by faith.

The next glimpse of the village Mahar in Marathi literature is in a verse of Tukaram where one sees the gatekeeper just for a moment and the true Brahman who is not angered at the touch of the outcaste. A somewhat fuller view is had in the *Bhaktivijaya* of Mahipati who flourished at the middle of the eighteenth century. He tells the legend of how the god Vithoba assumed the guise of a Mahar in order to assist Damajipant when he got into trouble over the distribution of grain. The clothing of the Mahar is described. His head-dress consists of rags. There is a black cord round his neck. In his ear he wears a ring called *pagar*. His loin-cloth is the very scanty *langoti*. He carries a staff in his hand. He is shod with torn sandals. When he greets another he bows his head, saying 'Zoharu.' His duty as a village servant seems to be the carrying of Government letters and money.<sup>1</sup> This picture is amplified by tradition. 'Under the Anhilwada kings, 1094-1143, the Dhedas used to wear a stag's horn tied to their waist.'<sup>2</sup> There was a time when from the black cord round the neck was suspended in front a black earthen pot for use as a spittoon and from behind there trailed on the ground a branch of the wild plum to obliterate the imprint of the Mahar's feet on the dust. Tradition affirms that this condition of dress was imposed on the Mahars in Poona by a Peshwa who suspected a watchman of clandestine relations with one of his zenana. The Scottish missionaries who first settled in Poona in the thirties of last century record that Mahars and other untouchables were not permitted to enter the Brahman quarters of that town before nine o'clock in the morning or after three o'clock in the afternoon lest their shadow fell on a Brahman. The writer on the Mahar caste in the *Bombay Gazetteer*, published in 1884-5, says:<sup>3</sup> 'Their touch, even the touch of their shadow, is thought to defile, and in some outlying villages, in the early morning the Mahar, as he passes the village well, may be seen crouching, that his shadow may not fall on the water drawers.'

There is no sign in history or in tradition that the Mahar

<sup>1</sup> Chapter xl, pp. 108 ff.

<sup>2</sup> *Bombay Gazetteer*, Vol. IX, i, p. 378.

<sup>3</sup> Vol. VII, p. 174; Vol. V, 333; Part I, p. 441.



was at feud with the Kunbi or the Maratha. On the other hand there is the indirect evidence of the literature already surveyed that the Mahar was a trusted servant of the Marathas. They often bear the same surnames as Maratha families, and there is a popular belief that they assumed those names because they were hereditary servants of such families. It is not uncommon in Berar to find Mahars who are addressed as 'brother' by men of the Kunbi and Maratha castes: and there is evidence that such brotherhood is often a blood relation through a common father. But there is a notorious feud between the Mahars and the Mangs, the latter being lower in the scale and in certain parts of the country competitors for village services, civil and religious. There is a tradition maintained by some Mahar religious leaders (*gosavi*) that Brahmans and Mangs are of the same race. In the Hyderabad State and in the Ahmednagar district the opposition between these untouchable classes seems to rest mainly on their competing claims to village emoluments. But there may also be an element of sectarian jealousy and of political partisanship in their feud. The Mangs in the Deccan are makers of ropes and it is said that the Mang never enjoyed the labour of rope-making so much as when he knew that his handiwork would be used for hanging a Mahar.

The public service in a village is usually hereditary; and the permanent right to render this service and to enjoy the emoluments attached thereto is known as a *watan*. This word, like many others used in connexion with law and administration, though now regarded as pure Marathi, is really Arabic and continues from the time of Moghal rule. 'The essential conditions of an hereditary office are these, (1) that it must be hereditary, and (2) that it must be connected with the administration or collection of the public revenue or with the village police or with the settlement of boundaries or other matters of civil administration. If either of these conditions is wanting the office would not be an hereditary office, and the property attached to such office would not be watan property.'<sup>1</sup> The village headman or patil, the village clerk or kulkarni are watandar; and so is the village Mahar.

<sup>1</sup> Phadnis, *The Watan Act*, p. 9.

The families which originally obtained the right of public service have grown and branched, so that there are many men in each village eligible for the duties of village Mahar. And they all guard their right in this matter though they may never be called upon to exercise it, for the watandar Mahars have the right to live rent free in the Maharwada. But it is only a few of those eligible who are needed for public service. Nevertheless all eligible know themselves as watandar Mahars.

The duties of the Mahars as village servants are those of watchmen, of gatekeepers, of messengers, of porters, of boundary referees, of guides, and it is because they have the duty of removing the carcasses of dead animals that they are nowadays counted untouchable. It must be remembered however, as a fact of great ethnological significance that the Mahar does not remove the carcase of a dog or of a pig. The number of men required by the village for such duties varies according to the size of the village and according as it is the seat of judicial and administrative offices. As a rule the number required on duty is much larger than is necessary for ordinary business. Now and again there is a rush of work when a superior officer of Government visits the village, and then the need of Mahars seems justified. But one sometimes finds ten Mahars kept on the leash when there seems to be hardly enough of work for two.

In the days of the Peshwai, as in the days of Moghal rule reflected in the poetry of Ekanath, the patil was responsible for the administration of his village. He might call on all the villagers to assist, if the occasion demanded so much help; but as a rule his deputy, the Chaugula and the Kotwal Mahars were sufficient. 'The most important revenue duty of the Mahar is to watch over the boundaries both of the village lands and of each individual's field; to see that they are not encroached upon, to give evidence in cases where they are disputed; he watched over crops whether cut or growing as long as they are in the fields. He is also the public messenger and guide and a most important actor in the police. When a theft or robbery happens, the watchman commences his enquiries and research. It is very common for him to track a thief by his footsteps; and if he does this to another village, so as to satisfy the watchman there, or if he

otherwise traces the property to an adjoining village, his responsibility ends, and it is the duty of the watchman of the new village to take up the pursuit. The last village to which the thief has been clearly traced becomes answerable for the property stolen which would otherwise fall on the village where the robbery was committed. The watchman is obliged to make up this amount as far as his means go, and the remainder is levied on the whole village.<sup>1</sup>

There was provision for only one watchman, but then as now the duties were shared in turn. These 'duties were to keep watch at night, to find out all arrivals and departures, to observe all strangers and to report any suspicious persons to the patil. The watchman was also bound to know the character of each man in the village; and in the event of a theft committed within the village bounds it was his duty to detect the thief. He was enabled to do this by his early habits of inquisitiveness and observation as well as by the nature of his allowance which being partly a small share of the grain and similar property belonging to each house, he was always kept on the watch to ascertain his fees and always in motion to collect them.'

From the time of King Sivaji, and right up to the end of the Peshwai, Ramoshis were employed as police and watchmen, as they are to the present day in the Poona and Ahmednagar districts. No one confuses them now with the village Mahar watchman. It is said that the Ramoshi was and is made a watchman on the principle of setting a thief to catch a thief. But of the twelve subordinate village servants the Mahar is said to have been the most useful and the most honest. His voice carried greatest weight in cases of disputed property. 'He was considered the most trustworthy man in the village, and though his caste was low, he held a highly respected position among the village servants.'<sup>2</sup>

When British rulers became responsible for the administration, the existing system of revenue and of police was in substance continued, but it became developed and changed as need for change arose. The duties and the emoluments of

<sup>1</sup> *Official Writings of Mountstuart Elphinstone*. Edited by G. W. Forrest, pp. 303, 304.

<sup>2</sup> *Bombay Gazetteer*, Vol. XVII, p. 438.

the Mahar as of the patil were changed, but the rights of the watandar were protected. The Watan Act enjoins that 'when all or any of the property of a village watan of lower degree than that of patil or kulkarni consists of a right to levy in money or in kind directly from individuals, it shall be lawful for the collector, on the application of any person interested, to cause the nature and the extent of such right and of the duties to be performed and the persons, families or classes liable to make payment and to perform the duties, to be defined in writing by a panchayat of five persons, whereof two shall be appointed by the villagers and one who shall be *sarpanch*, by the Collector.'<sup>1</sup> Certain changes made by the Inam Commission resulted in advantage to the inferior village servants. 'The amount raised by the levy of assessment on holdings of obsolete village servants has been partly applied to the payment in some cases of increased remuneration to this class of village servants.'<sup>2</sup>

The Kotwal Mahars are under the command of the patil for carrying messages connected with the administration, and when superior officers visit the village the duties of the Mahar are multiplied. One has found the village Mahar providing the firewood needed by the *mamlatdar's* cook and the grass needed by that officer's horse, and that in a part of the Deccan where firewood is hard to procure and where grass at certain seasons of the year is a luxury. This kind of service is given with a grudge, for it often amounts in modern days to slavery. In the old days this was a recognised duty of the village Mahar in return for his *baluta*; and the high officer considered this service part of his own perquisite; but nowadays higher officers are expected to pay for all they get from villagers.

The Mahar takes a pride in the duties required of him as Government messenger; for he is often entrusted with the transport of large sums of money remitted to the district treasury, and he has inherited from his fathers a tradition of faithfulness in the discharge of such duties. When the administration officers need accurate information regarding

<sup>1</sup> Bombay Watan Act, Section 18.

<sup>2</sup> H. S. Phadnis, *The Watan Act*, p. xxxvii.

the boundaries of holdings within the village, the Mahar is called on to produce this information. He defines the boundaries of any holding by walking solemnly along them. It is a Mahar who is employed to summon farmers to attend the revenue officer for the payment of the rents and taxes due.

As guardians of the gate the Mahars are named *veskar*, and their duty is to scrutinise all visitors and wayfarers, to enquire their name and business and report if necessary to the patil the information thus gathered. The *veskar* require all gipsy tribes such as the Gopala and the Nandiwale to show their performances in the Mahar wada and to pay a small fee before a licence is given for their performing within the village. If this did not amount to a censorship of shows, it provided at least an opportunity to scrutinise and count those visitors who are most likely to be light fingered.

If a traveller did not know his way from village to village he could call on the patil for the services of a Mahar to act as guide into the next village on the route. There the service could be extended through another Mahar, and the traveller thus enjoyed not only guidance but a certain amount of protection. This service is not often required in these days of good roads and maps, but one has known a benighted traveller finding it very valuable. When a traveller stayed for a time in a village his wants were supplied through the Mahar who also arranged for the payment for these wants; and it was the Mahar who arranged for the transport of the traveller's baggage to the next village. These porter duties are now more or less obsolete.

The removal of the carcasses of dead animals from the village to the *hadola* or place of bones, though distasteful to the sensitive Mahar, is often a source of profit; for in some districts he uses the flesh of cattle as food and in all districts he sells the hides and bones. The dead cattle of even the Mangs belong to the Mahars as their perquisite. As we have already noted the Mahar does not remove the carcase of a dog or of a pig. These are taboo to him; and the Mang has the privilege of dealing with such remains. In certain villages of the Nagpur district the Kunbi has to remove the carcase of a dog if there be no Mang. While the Mahar will not remove the carcasses of pigs and of dogs his attitude to the

dog is very different from his attitude to the pig. I have not met a Mahar who would not kill a pig that destroys his crops. He will not kill a dog though it be a danger to his children. No Mahar would keep a pig for profit or as a pet. Many Mahars keep dogs as pets and some swear their most solemn oath while holding a dog's tail.

Famine years recur with fatal frequency in certain parts of the Deccan. In such years one has known the Mahars enjoying great profit from the calamity which impoverished their neighbours; for they made great trade in hides. Indeed the frequency of famine years may be one explanation of the survival of the Mahar on an income which is normally very lean. There is a saying to the effect that 'the Kanarese is a cheat, the Telugu is a thief, and the Mahar is an eater of forbidden food.' (कानडा कयटा, तेलुगा चोर, आणि महार हरामखोर.) This saying may well have been coined when the British armies under General Abercrombie and Lord Cornwallis were retiring from before the walls of Seringapatam in 1791. 'The season of the year was unfavourable to the cattle. . . . The scarcity of grain was such that the lower class of followers were reduced to the necessity of subsisting chiefly on the putrid flesh of the dead bullocks, and the public store of rice was nearly exhausted, a loss having taken place from the negligence or embezzlement of the bullock drivers on the march.' In a situation such as that the Mahar is one of the fittest to survive.

Some of the public duties of the Mahars are of a religious nature. In certain villages the children of the chief Maratha families, when they are five days old, are carried to the home of a Mahar and there dedicated to the goddess Satwai whose mediators or guardians the Mahars are said to be by right. When a marriage takes place, a *torana*, a string of leaves, is hung across the entrance to the temporary place of ceremony. It is the duty of a Mahar to hang this torana. In Bhandara certain castes employ a Mahar *mohoturya* to fix the date of their weddings and the Panwar Rajputs make the first offering of the feast in honour of Narayanadevi to a Mahar.<sup>1</sup> In the Deccan when a Kunbi sets forth on his wedding journey to

<sup>1</sup> *Castes and Tribes of the Central Provinces*, Vol. IV, p. 131.

the village of his bride, a cocoanut is broken at the village gate and is given to the Mahar who guards the gate. The gatekeeper stands in front of the bridegroom as if to hinder his progress, and receives a white turban and a cotton shoulder cloth. At the temple of the bride's village the Mahar of that village brings a horse for the bridegroom to ride upon. When the home of the bride is reached a Mahar woman waves an iron lamp around his head and chants the prayer, 'May all your pains and troubles vanish, and the riches of Bali be poured on you.' She receives a cheap bodice.<sup>1</sup> When a human being dies the Mahars carry fuel to the cremation ground, and they receive as reward the shroud, in which a small sum of money is knotted. This custom explains the answer which a Mahar is represented as giving in a proverb to an abusive Brahman. 'Get out, you Mahar,' says the Brahman. 'One day,' replies the Mahar, 'I shall bring your cowdung cakes.'

The Holi is a Spring festival, the chief part of which consists in worshipping fecundity in connexion with a bon-fire. There is a Holi fire kindled in every village square and in every house, even in the houses of Brahmins. In many villages the Mahars are the first to light the Holi fire and from their fire the Kunbis steal firebrands wherewith to kindle the large heap of fuel prepared in the village square. The other villages carry the kindling for their private fires from the public one.

The Mahars are guardians of the goddess Mariai whose shrine is found in every Mahar wada in the Deccan and elsewhere in India. This goddess is often named Laxmi by the Mahars. She it is who comes in the form of cholera; and when an epidemic of that disease breaks out she is propitiated by public sacrifice in which the Mahars take a leading part. There is no image of Mariai in human shape. She is represented by a row of small stones, usually seven in number and daubed with red lead. In certain parts of the Nagpur district this image on the east of the village is known as Mata or Gramdevi, that is Mother or Village Goddess.

In many villages there remain from time immemorial wide

<sup>1</sup> *Castes and Tribes of Bombay*, Vol. II, p. 297.

circles of unhewn stones forming the temples of the god Vetala. Where these are still in use the village Mahar smears them with whitewash and tips them with red lead, twice a month, on the no-moon night and on the full-moon night. Vetala is the king of ghosts or bhuta. His chief festival days are Mahasivaratra, Holi and Dasera. In many parts of the Konkan Mahars enjoy marked prominence in connexion with primitive deities. Mahars and Mangs are said to be of the race of the demons which swallow the moon at the time of eclipse, and numbers of these castes go about the streets on such occasions asking for alms on the ground that charity will remove the eclipse. They shout '*de dana suta girana.*' A sacrificial cock offered in connexion with the Holi fire at Vijayadurg falls to the lot of the Mahars, and this perquisite is considered an honour. At certain places in the Ratnagiri district Mahars play a considerable part in the ceremonies performed for the exorcism of disease spirits, whether those spirits have entered human beings or animals. And there are shrines in that district whose ministrants are Mahars. The evil-eye of a tiger sometimes afflicts an ox. A Mahar removes that influence by waving round the animal an oil lamp 'burned in the eye of a dead tiger.' In the Konkan also a Mahar may be an auspicious sight to a man starting out on any enterprise; but that is for the Mahar quite a doubtful honour because he shares it with Brahmans and Jackals and others.<sup>1</sup>

The Mahar is thus revealed as occupying a very important place in the religious as well as the political life of the village community. A writer in the *Bombay Gazetteer*,<sup>2</sup> describing the Mahars of the Ahmednagar district, affirms 'that they also held an important part in all village religious rites. Attached to every village temple is the shrine of the Mahar deva who is regularly worshipped by villagers of all classes including Brahmans, at the same time as the god of the chief temple.' It would be instructive in other connexions if it were possible to determine whether this worship by higher castes of the Mahar deva is a result of a facile eclecticism

<sup>1</sup> Vide Jackson, *Folklore of the Konkan*, passim.

<sup>2</sup> Vol. XVII, p. 172.



and a fear of the devil or a continuation in the race of an ancient worship which Brahmanism as an imported culture has not been able or willing to displace.

The greater part of the payment for public service in the village has been in kind. The patil holds some of the village lands as his perquisite; and the watandar Mahars hold not only ground suitable for dwelling sites, but also a piece of arable land. This land is known as *maharki* and it is often land of good quality. The maharki was usually held free of all rent and tax, but in the Peshwai it was assessed; and it could not be sold absolutely or alienated. If this land did happen to fall into the hands of a user, not a watandar, as might easily happen in villages which became railway centres where an imported population required building sites, the land might be retained by him only if he paid an adequate rent which should go to the watandar Mahars. In this connexion the following case and ruling is of interest and of value: 'When the mahalkari framed the Mahar watan register, he found that certain Mahar watan lands had long been in the possession of S, and therefore ordered that the lands, being service inam lands, should be restored to the Mahars. The case may be taken to fall under S. 9. Under that section the Collector can either resume the land or impose a full rent. Looking to the facts that this case did not arise out of any complaint by the Mahars themselves and that S. has long been paying a rent, the question arises whether the interests of the watandars would not be sufficiently met by raising the present rent to a full one if it is below that now. The Mahars might in this way actually get more profit from the holdings than if they were delivered into their own thrifless hands. I recommend that the land be restored to the petitioner S, and that payment of full rent should be made to the Mahars.'<sup>1</sup>

Besides the maharki land the watandar Mahars enjoy other rights and privileges which have belonged to them for centuries under conditions which have changed more or less from age to age. The Mahars of the Deccan cherish certain documents which set forth their duties and the rewards

<sup>1</sup> Sanctioned No. 5598, June 5, 1908.

attached to them. The oldest of these charters, of which I have seen only a copy, was given within the temple at Mungipaithan on the Godaveri on Sunday, the 13th day of the bright fortnight of Sravana in the Shake year 1051 (A.D. 1129). It is attested by patils and kulkarnis of Nasik, Junuar, Khed, Poona, Pandharpur, Bedar, Paithan. It sets forth first the animals on which bridegrooms of various castes and rank may ride. There follow lists of the dues which the Mahars may claim from people of various castes for the duties performed by them in connexion with marriages and deaths and dinners. At that time they got three and a half rupees in connexion with deaths and a similar amount in connexion with a marriage. Most of their dues amounted to one anna only. At times the money was supplemented with bread. At the house of the deshmukh and the kulkarni the rabata Mahar (that is the one designated for Government duties) got bread, and his wife received bread at the house of the patil. While the Mahar, and he alone, might carry cattle to the place of bones, it was the Mang who carried away dead pigs. When a Mahar wedding was being performed the Mang got a turban and a *lugade* (a woman's dress); but he had to supply five days' fuel as service. When the Mahar needed a broom for official use it was the Mang who made and supplied it. To all the twelve village servants (*balutedar*) the Mahars had to provide the pelts of animals as they needed them; but for the pelts supplied a return was made in fruits of the earth, for each pelt a mana of *ghata*. The *wani* or grocer had to supply the Mahar with tobacco and *supari* daily; and the seller of cigarette leaves provided leaves wherein to roll the tobacco for smoking. The barber gave the Mahar a shave once a month. The oilman provided oil daily. Travelling players had to pay one *paisa* for each performance staged by them. From each kilnful of new pots the potter had to give five to the Mahar. The blacksmith repaired his weeding tool and his axe; and the shoemaker cleaned (repaired) his shoes. The *Bhat* performed his weddings and got ten paisa for his services. It was a Mahar and not a Mang who prepared the place in the fields for the eating of parched grain (*hurada*) at the Sankranta festival. At the Divali (feast of lamps) the Mahar collected the tax of four

rupees payable to Government at the lamp waving (*owalne*). The village community (*gamva pandhari*) gave the gatekeeper (Veskar) two rupees at this festival. The offerings made at the town Holi and those made at Pola (worship) of draught animals belonged to the Mahar.

Another *sanad* given at Paithan in the temple of Swami Ekanatha, manifestly at much later date, as the language of the document and the name of the temple indicate, shows some changes in the conditions of the Mahar's services and remuneration. For example, the strolling players now must give the Mahar six paise for each performance. The garden fruits mentioned in the earlier document as affording the Mahar a claim on the gardener, are the mango, the guava, the cocoanut, the plantain, the sweet lime, the malua: in this later document the Mahar gets daily fifteen sugar-canes and a seer of *gula*; but at the sugar-cane harvest the Mahar must give his labour. The Mahar designated for Government service must give a torana for the village gate and for the entrances to the houses of the inamdars (*mokasa*). There are perquisites for him also in the money put into the water sprinkled on bridegrooms at their weddings and in the rice thrown on the bride and bridegroom during the ceremony. He gets a lugade and a *pagote* and five days' food at weddings; and if the ceremony be at a common man's house his fee is six and a half rupees. He is not allowed to appropriate the pelts of animals; but instead he gets other things such as wounded animals, soiled lugaden and broken pots. The goddess Bhadivi is mentioned as an object of worship by the village community. At the time of this worship the Mahar receives two rupees. This document forbids the Mang to share in the service of Mariai or of Laxmi.

If all these rights and privileges and emoluments be counted separately it may be possible to make up the number to fifty-two which is the number named in the earlier *sanad* and retained by tradition in the mind of the folk. It is probable that the name '*bawanahaqqa*' or fifty-two rights is just an idiomatic way of expressing the multiplicity of these rights taken in their totality. A Maratha villager uses the expression '*panch pannas*' (five fifty) if he wishes to give an estimate, of say, the number of animals in a large herd. There

is an interesting parallel to the expression, 'bawanahaqqa', in the term, *bawana mawala*. About the year 1346 a Koli chief named Papera gained a large measure of independence through the support of the early Bahmani kings. At that time 'Western Ahmednagar and Poona were divided into fifty-two valleys or Bawana Mawala, each under an hereditary Koli Chief or Naik with the rank of a Sardar or Noble in the Bahamani kingdom. The head of the fifty-two valleys with the title of Sarnaik or Chief Captain was a Musalman whose headquarters were at Junnar in Poona.'<sup>1</sup>

There is another possible explanation of the name, 'bawana-haqq.' A considerable section of the Mahar people now found in the Nagpur and Bhandara districts chiefly is named Bawne. The bawanahaqq may be an adaptation of the phrase, 'Bawane haqq', that is the rights and privileges of the Bawane folk. No clear inference can be made from names, for the name may point in either of two directions. But this much may be set forth as indisputable that the phrase bawanahaqq must have formed under Musalman influence. But the rights so named in Musalman times must have existed from time immemorial; for the sanad given at Mungi Paithan must have been just a confirmation or a codification of privileges that had existed long before the sanad was given.

At the present day the so-called fifty-two rights of the Mahars have dwindled in number to twenty odd, among which the chief are still the charges levied in connexion with weddings and funerals, to which may be added the gleanings of grain and other offerings at the gate, on the threshing floor and on the altars of ancient village deities. They have a right to the carcasses of animals that die a natural death or by disease. But the Government of the Central Provinces has abolished in Berar this primitive method of paying for public service; and the village Mahar gets a monthly wage in cash through the village authorities. Many farmers are now seeing the injustice of having to mulct themselves in field produce for services which they do not need. The more enlightened among the Mahars themselves recognise that their watandar privileges though precious in the light of sentiment, are yet

<sup>1</sup> *Bombay Gazetteer*, Vol. XVII, pp. 353, 354.

occasions of bondage as all privileges are, and that economically it would be well for them if the example set by the Central Provinces were extended to all public servants everywhere.

Besides the rights and inams enjoyed by Mahars as a class because of their position in the village community there are others pertaining to certain families and confirmed by charter on account of special services rendered to rulers who had in their power the disposal of public lands. The story of the service rendered by Vitthunak to the pious Damajipant in a time of severe famine has been flooded with religious light, and Vitthunak has been identified with the god of Pandhari. The story has now merged into the body of literary and religious legend of the Maratha mind. And as the story is used by the devout to magnify the grace of Pandurang it is used by Mahar tradition to explain the granting to them as a class by a Moghal ruler of their fifty-two rights.

There are still in existence, and jealously guarded, copper-plate sanads which confirm inams either to particular Mahar families or to village groups. One such copper-plate is owned by the Mahars of the village of Koya in the Moghalai near Ahmednagar. It was lent by them to me that I might decipher it. The language is beyond all my friends. I have preserved a photograph of the plate.

The most interesting copper-plate of which I have heard is possessed by a family near Purandhar, in the Poona district. The plate is said to exist: but it is so jealously guarded that only favoured Mahars may cast their eyes upon it. A friend so favoured procured for me a copy of its terms and of its story. It was given in the year Shake 1109 (the year must be inaccurately transcribed) by a king of Bedar to a Mahar of Purandhar named Baharnak Bangale. The story runs that the king was building a bastion of the fort of Purandhar and the mason work would not stand, presumably because the foundations were slipping. There was a goddess of the locality who demanded in a dream the sacrifice of an eldest son and an eldest daughter-in-law, to be buried in the foundations according to very ancient and world-wide custom. Baharnak provided the offering; the foundations were consolidated; and the bastion reached completion. The King,

being pleased with Baharnak, granted to him and to his heirs in perpetuity in Purandhar, Saswad, Supe and other villages. This Mahar was evidently a mighty man of valour who could command fighters as well as builders, and he seems to have been a fearless hunter. Along with his companion, Jeaji Naik, he took a hand in assisting the king to subdue a revolt by Subhankhan at Pratapgad and by Abdulshah at Bedar. He carried out very expeditiously and to the king's satisfaction building work at Rajgad, and on another occasion he and his companion brought a Bengal tiger in a cage to the king. For these deeds of daring he was given the Sarnaiki of eight parts and certain rights of precedence in social standing and the leadership of the eighteen lakhs of Somaranshi. . . .

This story is not solitary. A Mahar boy and a girl were buried thus under the gates of the Satara fort in 1109. A Mang was buried under the Peshwa's Shanwar Palace in Poona in 1750. A Maratha earned the headship of Lohogad ford for the burying of a newly married couple beneath its main entrance in 1790. A patil at Sholapur and a deshmuikh of the same town hold rights granted for similar sacrificial gifts.<sup>1</sup> The Mahars of the fort of Panhala in the Southern Maratha country, though nowadays poor in estate, have a memory of rights in villages round about. It is said that they were originally brought to Panhala by Aurangzebe as guards to his daughter who abode in that fortress. A recurring tradition among Mahars concerns their faithfulness in guarding the zenanas of Moslem rulers and rights gained in recognition of such services.

The Mahar it would seem was not only the gatekeeper of the village, but even at times the keeper of the forts which were as the gates of the land.

<sup>1</sup> *Bombay Gazetteer*, Vol. XX, p. 527.

## CHAPTER III

### THE MAHAR IN HIS HOME

THE house in which the typical Mahar lives is often described as mean and not at all tidy. That is a misleading generalisation. Their homes vary according to their worldly estate and according to the permanence of their abode in a town. The watandar Mahar cannot grow rich on the emoluments of his village office, and therefore he cannot own a large house; but many of their families have been farming good land for generations, and their homes are similar in solidity and in accommodation to those of many of their Maratha neighbours. In many of the Deccan villages some of the watandar Mahars own houses which are solid enough even if they be not spacious; and in districts such as Nagpur and Bhandara, where they have been spinners and weavers for generations, they live in houses which are sometimes commodious and which are always neat and clean. When men go to a centre of industry and commerce as casual labourers they have little opportunity and less inducement to erect permanent houses, since they have no guarantee of constant employment, and their wage does not easily stretch beyond their daily needs of food and clothing. In such centres, too, they are more liable to be intemperate in their habits than the men in remote and small villages. Thus in centres like Nagpur one comes across cases of men living in tiny huts constructed out of flattened kerosene oil tins, while they have quite good houses in their native villages. When Mahars work as building contractors, or money lenders or commission agents they often live in well constructed houses of their own.

What is true of their houses is true also of the clothing

which the Mahars wear. The days are past when they must affect an appearance of abject poverty such as the poet Mahipati describes. When a man is engaged in work which soils clothing one must expect him to be clad in his oldest garments. But on festive occasions the well-to-do Mahar is dressed nowadays pretty much as his Maratha neighbour is. This holds good of their women also. A patched garment may be seen on them when they are engaged in housework or on the fields; but on a pilgrimage or at a wedding the Maharin shows the same taste as her neighbours do, though, if she be poor, she may not possess rich gold or silver ornaments.

The Mahar women wear their robe usually as their Maratha sisters do, wound round the body from the waist with the lower edge drawn back between the legs and tucked in at the waist behind, the other end being draped over the head and shoulders, leaving the face exposed. This mode of draping the sari or *luga* is suited to working conditions. It is known as *kasta*. The robe is sometimes used by Mahar women to resemble a skirt. In the Maratha country Brahman ladies always affect the *kasta* mode and they never drape the sari over their heads. Most Mahar women in the Deccan nowadays wear the *choli* or bodice: but in the Central Provinces they sometimes follow the old rule of having the chest covered only by a fold of the robe. When a Mahar woman carries a load such as a pot of water or a bundle of grass or of cotton she puts it on her head, as all, save Brahmans, do. Like her non-Brahman neighbours she may carry to the fields her husband's bread or her tiny baby in a shallow basket poised on her head. Larger children are carried astride on the hip and sometimes slung on the back in a cloth secured in front after passing over the shoulders. Mahar women have tattoo marks on their foreheads and on their arms and legs. Many of them get these marks at the time of their marriage. When a woman works in a mill or on the fields she pulls the end of her sari close over her right shoulder and tucks it in at her waist, so that it cannot fly loose in the wind.

It is in their food that the Mahars are unique among the people who acknowledge the Brahmans as earth gods (*bhudeva*), for they eat the flesh of the ox or the cow as well as of sheep



and of goats, of fowls and of fish. But they will not touch the flesh of the pig, not even that of the wild boar which is considered a delicacy by many Kunbi people. The Mangs who are counted inferior to the Mahars will not eat beef, but they eat pigs, sometimes roasting them alive, as their ancestors usually did. Some of the Maratha Kunbi eat the flesh of the sheep, others of them prefer the flesh of the goat. Most Kunbis will eat the flesh of antelope and of wild pig; but the ox is sacred to them. In all cases the flesh eaten by the Maratha must be *halal*, that is to say the animal must be slaughtered in the Moslem way, which is akin to that of the Jews. The Mahar on the other hand has been used to eating the flesh of oxen, sheep, goats that die by accident or of old age. This practice makes them abhorrent to the other classes of Hindus. But many Mahars are departing from this custom out of a sense of self-respect and in obedience to the rules of such religious sects as the Warkari and the Minbhau. Their attachment to these sects and to reform in diet is often occasioned by the desire to stand well in the opinion of their neighbours. In the Nagpur district the use of the flesh of animals that have died of natural causes has become more or less of a memory.

Mahars endure contumely not only on the ground that they eat braxy, but there is a belief that they are sometimes guilty of poisoning cattle in order to provide themselves with food and pelts. I have learned in the Poona District that the method of poisoning consists in pricking a vein of a cow or bullock with a beekthorn smeared with a paste made from a common seed whose substance though more or less innocuous when swallowed, save in the case of pregnant women, yet acts like cobra poison when introduced into the blood stream. The use of this seed for cattle poisoning seems to be unknown in the Nagpur district, and there trustworthy Mahars declare that their people never poison cattle, though they admit that when a few cattle die mysteriously at one time in a village the Mahars are sometimes had into court on a charge of destroying the cattle for the sake of their hides.

It is difficult to believe that the flesh of animals which die of poisoning can be safe as human food. Many will be found also who deny with horror the suggestion that any class of

Hindus can be found guilty of so heinous a sin as the deliberate killing of an ox or of a cow even for the sake of its hide. Readers of George Borrow will remember that various opinions may be held regarding the value of the flesh of a poisoned animal and that a practice which falls into desuetude in times of prosperity may well have been practised in times of famine and stress. Since the Gypsies of whom Borrow knew and wrote so much, are believed to be in origin an Indian tribe, it may be of some value and interest to recall here two short passages on the poisoning of domestic animals or the 'drabbing of the baulor.' 'The accusation of producing disease and death amongst the cattle was far from groundless. Indeed, however strange and incredible it may sound in the present day to those who are unacquainted with this caste, and the peculiar habits of the Rommanees, the practice is still occasionally pursued in England and many other countries where they are found. From this practice, when they are not detected, they derive considerable advantage. Poisoning cattle is exercised by them in two ways: by one they merely cause disease in the animals with the view of receiving money for curing them upon offering their services; the poison is generally administered by powders cast at night into the mangers of the animals: this way is only practised upon the larger cattle such as horses and cows. But by the other, which they practise chiefly upon swine, speedy death is almost invariably produced, the drug administered being of a highly intoxicating nature and affecting the brain. They then apply at the house or farm where the disaster has occurred, for the carcase of the animal, which is generally given to them without suspicion, and then they feast on the flesh, which is not injured by the poison which only affects the head.' (Zincale, Introduction). 'Had you tasted that pork, brother, you would have found that it was sweet and tasty, which balluva which is drabbed can hardly be expected to be. We have no reason to drab baulor at present for we have money and credit; but necessity has no law. Our forefathers occasionally drabbed baulor; some of our people may still do such a thing but only from compulsion.'<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Romany Rye*, Chap. viii; cf. *Lavengro*, Chap. lxx. ff.

The kind of food given to Mahars in return for their labour as village servants is often mentioned in the poetry which refers to their calling. They received scraps and leavings; and there is a note of humiliation in their own mention of such food. But when they earn a money wage in any of the callings open to them, as house servants to Christians or Moslems, as sals or horsemen, as masons, as labourers on roads and public works, they eat the kind of food they can best afford; and their cooking is carried out with due attention to cleanliness and thoroughness.

Marriage customs vary in minor details from district to district; and some of the subcastes perform the actual wedding ceremony in ways peculiar to themselves. This is inevitable when customs have never been written down, and when ceremonies are carried out by half educated people.

Child marriage prevailed before the passing of the Sarda Act, as in all other castes, but it was not regarded as necessarily binding. The Sarda Act is more or less of a dead letter in rural places. Many Mahars who could not afford the expense of a wedding put off the ceremony until the age of puberty was well past.

The asking of the bride (*soyra, magni*) has to be done with ceremony and the initiative rests with the father or guardian of the boy. The bride has to be chosen from without the *kula* or clan and within the subcaste. The *kula* is marked by the surname. So it usually happens that parties of the same surname cannot marry: but the final basis of judgment as to who may marry is the *kula-devaka* or the clan totem. That is to say, no two persons who have the same devaka may marry. Some families bearing different surnames have the same devaka. The kinship of the *kula* is reckoned along the lines of male descent only: the children of male clansmen may not marry. But the union of the children of sisters is also forbidden.

The custom of not marrying outside the subcaste is not rigidly enforced everywhere. Indeed Brahmanical law even does not forbid the marriage of parties belonging to different castes. Provided a man chooses his first bride from among women of his own caste, he may select subsequent ones from a lower caste. Such marriages are known as *anuloma* or along

the pile. If a sudra man marries a woman of higher caste the marriage is *pratiloma* or against the pile. Pratiloma marriages are regarded as incestuous. There is a story current of a Brahman saint, Malopant, who married a Mahar girl unwittingly. When the husband found out her caste he did not put her away. When she died he performed the usual funeral rites, and a miracle took place which proved that the Brahman and his Mahar wife were both pure.<sup>1</sup>

At the asking ceremony the girl is seated on a low stool, and the boy's father presents to her cocoanut kernel (copra) and a new robe (lugade) of as good a quality as he can afford. The girl goes into her mother's house and puts on the new lugade. Then the parents of the boy make around her head a wave offering (*owalane*) of as much coin as they can afford. Her own relatives perform a similar ceremony. The money thus offered is divided between the barber, the Mang and the hired singing woman, the first receiving a half, and the others a quarter share. The boy's father makes a money payment of a sum varying from ten to twenty-five rupees to the father of the bride.

The auspicious day for the actual wedding ceremony is foretold either by the village *Zoshi* or by a Mahar *Mahoturya*. At the time of the foretelling of the auspicious day the priest hands to the parents a few grains of rice which he has blessed in the name of Ganapati (The Lord of Hosts) and he names the woman of good fortune who has to bathe the groom in turmeric water. This woman takes along with her four others of good omen, that is to say they are married and between the ages of fourteen and twenty. Women who have children are not chosen for this duty on the ground that such are not free to leave their households for the period of marriage ceremonies. The possession of children really increases a woman's auspicious influence; but if she be poor she cannot easily leave her children in the care of another. The five women of good fortune take turmeric roots (*halada*), some yellow millet grains and the leaves used for pansupari. These are mixed together, and the mixture is divided into two portions. Each portion is bound into a piece of new

<sup>1</sup> Ranade, *Rise of the Maratha Power*, p. 151.

cloth, and the bundles are tied one to the pot for storing water for household purposes (*ranjana*) and one to the millstone (*zaten*). Turmeric is pounded and mixed with water and rubbed into the skin of the bridegroom. A portion of the turmeric paste is sent to the bride for her anointing. If the bride be quite a young child she does not wear a bodice at this washing ceremony; if she be of age she wears a white bodice and a white lugaden.

The manner of the washing is as follows: Five brass water vessels are filled with warm water, and are arranged in a circle. White cotton yarn is wound five times round these severally and all together. The bride in her home—and the bridegroom in his—is set in the centre of the circle of pots. All the pots are raised at the same time by the ministering women of good augury, and the water in them is poured over the bride and the bridegroom. Relatives consider it an honour to arrange for the halada ceremony. Therefore various houses are visited for the repetition of this ceremony. Each time either of the happy ones goes forth for this washing, smears of soot are rubbed into his or her brow and cheeks and on the feet outlining the edge of the upper of a shoe. It is said that the yellow colour imparted by the turmeric adds beauty to the person. The black marks on the other hand are said to mar their beauty in order to defend them from the assaults of covetous and lustful demons.

On the auspicious day fixed for the wedding the relatives of both parties assemble at the house of the bride near the hour of evening twilight in the case of the Somawanshi, the Barake and the Ladavansa; and just before dawn in the case of a Bawane marriage. 'Twixt the gloamin' and the mirk when the kye comes hame,' and the dust raised by home returning cattle is floating in the air, a special good fortune seems to attend those about to wed. In Berar the tying of the knot must take place just as the sun is dipping over the western horizon in the case of a Somawanshi ceremony. In the Deccan this caste must have the marriage knot tied in the dark. The bride must be clad in a *sada khenda* (a coarse robe) however well-to-do her parents may be. The groom must wear a *basinga* which is a head-dress

of paper with drooping curls which hang in front of the face. A long white cloth is hung on edge as it were running east and west. This serves as a screen on either side of which stand the contracting parties, the boy facing west and the girl facing east. They put their feet into a bamboo basket, the boy's toes resting on those of the girl. In some places they stand with clasped hands in which a pansupari roll is held. In other parts each holds over the head of the other the hands joined and cupped as for holding rice. The verses of blessing or the *mungalasutra* are then pronounced; and at the concluding word, '*sawadhana*,' the bystanders clap their hands and throw rice on the couple. The screen is removed from between them and the boy crooks the little finger of his left hand into the little finger of the girl's right hand. The cloth is now stretched as a canopy over their heads. When the marriage is thus complete a resting place (*janusa*) is appointed at the house of a man of unblemished character who is known as *laganya* and whose wife is *subasina*. The *kakana*, a yellow band of cloth about eighteen inches long, which had been bound on the groom's forearm at the *magani*, is now removed.

The verses of blessing should number five. References are made in these to the marriages of Janakī, of Sita, of Vishwamitra, of Kṛṣṇa and of Arjuna. They all end with the advice, 'alert.' The reason given for the use of this word, 'swadhana' is the story of a saintly man who was once going through the marriage ceremony in an absent-minded mood, and who had his bride stolen from his side by a rakshasa.

A marriage and its attendant functions should last for five days. The actual wedding takes place on the first day. The bridegroom spends three days at the bride's home and starts on the fourth day for his own home. When the couple arrive at the bridegroom's home they are received by his mother who makes a wave offering of burnt bread round their heads and a libation of water at their feet. On entering the house their paper coronets are removed and again put on. A distribution of leaves and betel nuts among the guests finishes the ceremony. The wedding journeys are carried out to the accompaniment of loud music which serves the double purpose of display and of proclamation of the banns.

The Mahar man may have more than one wife, but the wife may not have more than one legal husband. Quite a number practise polygamy for various reasons. The chief excuse given for taking a second wife is that the first is childless. But there is much pith in the Marathi idiom which describes a man's marriage in the phrase, 'his two hands have become four.' A farmer or a weaver finds a plurality of wives productive of wealth, if not of peace.

Widows are permitted to remarry in Mahar customary law, but such marriages are not held in high esteem, especially by the women. The rules governing widow remarriage vary from district to district. Such marriages are everywhere celebrated in the dark, but not on a new moon night, and the ceremony is simple, unattended with music. In Khandesh a widow is permitted to marry a younger brother of her deceased husband, but nowhere does this custom seem to be enjoined. Usually a widow is not allowed to marry any man of her deceased husband's kula; and in some districts she is forbidden to marry one who is a cousin through her father's sister, her mother's sister or her mother's brother. In most widow marriages the departed husband's influence must be exorcised by the destruction of the clothing which the woman wore during her first marriage, or by the sacrifice of a cock whose flesh may not be eaten by the married pair. When a bachelor marries a widow he must first go through a ceremony with a *rui* plant or with a ring. This mock marriage is carried through with full ceremonies. The plant is hewn down and buried in a graveyard. The man thus becomes a widower and is of equal status with the woman whose hand he seeks. This form of marriage is also incumbent on a man who has lost two wives and who is about to marry a third. It is named *arka vivaha*. If a girl of the Bawane is remarried she is subjected to degrading ceremonies. A lock of her hair is shorn; she is clad in tattered garments; she is taken to the village boundaries where her bangles are broken; the ceremony is performed in the dark, and the whole proceeding occupies only one day.

Marriages are dissolved very simply. The common village word for dissolution of marriage is *kadi modane*, to break a twig. The phrase is derived from the custom whereby the

patila or the caste panchayata in the presence of the public breaks a small twig and declares the marriage null and void. Divorce proceedings may be instituted by either husband or wife. It is very common among the Dhedas of Gujerat. Divorce is granted if the husband ill-treats the wife or if the wife is guilty of adultery, or if either party suffers from an incurable disease. A divorced woman may remarry in the caste according to the rites of widow remarriage; but if she be divorced because of adultery with a man of a lower caste she is driven out of caste and may not marry a Mahar.

The ceremonies connected with the birth of a child in a Mahar's house in olden time are indicated in a poem which bears the name of Namadeva and which describes the happenings at the birth of Karmamela, Chokhoba's son. Knowing that the day of her visitation was come the mother asked her husband to bring to the house all the things needed; but he, after the manner of saints and poets, went off to his sister's house, forgetting what his business was. The god, Pandurang, however, is never unmindful of his saints; so he assumed the form of Chokha's sister and came to attend to the mother of Chokhoba's son. As the god entered the house in the form of the sister-in-law, the expectant mother greeted him lovingly. The sister-in-law professed to have been sent by her brother Chokha. Then Chokha's wife was delivered of a son, and the nurse rejoiced. 'Sugar was distributed to every class, and Vithai (the nurse) said, "My Chokha has a son." Having applied unguents she massaged and bathed the mother. The langour of the time of parturition departed. With rejoicing she observed the fifth day worship, and gave a dinner to the caste. With great joy the naming day was celebrated, and a feast was made for the caste. And on the thirteenth day the nurse laid the babe in the cradle. A sari and a choli were put upon the mother; a little robe and a little cap did Rakhmai bring. A woman whose husband is living was called and the child was laid in the cradle and was named Karmamela. The time came for the nurse to depart, and the mother poured out her thanks:—"How indeed can I keep count of your kindnesses, I shall not forget them for age on age." "Take good care now of my Karmamela: his father will soon come home." When



the father arrived his wife honoured his feet, and lifting the babe presented it to him.' This is a beautiful picture of domestic felicity; and the poet who drew the picture must have copied actual life.

We note the attentions paid to the mother and the child during the first four days. A bathing place is prepared in a corner of the room. The mother and child are bathed and laid on a cot underneath which a fire of charcoal is kept burning. A handful of water is sprinkled on the child when it is born. The umbilical cord is cut: it is passed through the child's mouth and put into an earthen pot and buried outside the house. A lamp is lit and kept burning in the room day and night. The mother is given to swallow a mixture of katbol and neem leaves, and the child is encouraged to suck a rag whose end dips into a saucer of honey or of molasses. The mother is on light diet for three days. On the fifth day she takes ordinary food. On the evening of that day the goddess Satvai is worshipped. Her image, an armless bust, is set on a stone slab if an image is available; a cruise lamp is fashioned out of wheat dough and set beside the bathing place where the child may not see the light; flowers and fruit are laid on the slab. Five married women are invited to dine at the house. For eleven days the mother is unclean. On the twelfth day the mother and child receive a bath of purification, the mother's clothes are washed and the house is cleansed by the smearing of cowdung on the floor and walls. Satvai in the form of five round pebbles is worshipped; and the mother prays to the goddess to protect the child. The naming of the child takes place on the twelfth or the thirteenth day, and the child is laid in a cradle which is suspended from a rafter. In Berar the child's name is given by a Mohoturya. The friends who gather for the naming ceremony receive *pansupari*.

Some of the names given to children are words for worthless things, the purpose being to protect the child's soul from the envy of demons. Examples of such names are Dagadu (stone), Bhikaria (beggar), Kacharu (refuse), Langada (lame). The usual names are those common among other Hindus, being the names of gods or of heroes in the case of boys and of goddesses, of virtuous women and of rivers in the case of

girls. Examples of such names are Mahadu, Gopala, Rama, Laxmana in the case of boys, and in the case of girls Laxmi, Sita, Ganga, Yamuna.

During their first year both boys and girls are initiated by a religious teacher. The child's father presents to the teacher a *dhotara* (loin cloth), a cocoanut, a few grains of rice, a small sum of money from two annas to one rupee in value, some flowers and frankincense. He smears sandal-wood paste on the teacher's brow and does obeisance to him. The teacher takes the child upon his knee and breathes into both its ears; and covering the child and his head with a cloth he whispers a sacred verse into the right ear of the child. This ceremony of initiation is called *Kanaphukane* or 'blowing into the ear.'

When a girl reaches the age of puberty she is kept apart for three days. On the fourth day she is bathed and a cocoanut and rice are placed in her lap.

The Mahars dispose of their dead by burial as a rule, but in some districts they burn them. In the Poona district when a man is known to be dying 'a few drops of water in which a Brahman's feet have been washed are put into his mouth.'<sup>1</sup> The dead body is laid on the threshold of the house, and warm water is poured over it. The body is then enshrouded in a new white cloth into whose hem a handful of rice is tied. The corpse is borne by four relatives on a simple bier of bamboos lashed together, or on a sling. It is carried feet foremost to the burying place. The chief mourner walks in front barefoot and bareheaded carrying an earthen pot of burning fuel. The other mourners come after the corpse. The bearers rest their burden on the ground on the way to the grave, and the rice from the hem of the shroud is laid on the ground and covered with pebbles. The grave is dug to a depth of about five feet. Its orientation is north and south. The body is laid naked into the grave, the head towards the north. At Saswad in the Poona district the corpse is buried sitting and facing east. The body of a married woman is clad in a green sari. In most places the body is laid in the grave prone on its back. The head is covered with leaves of the Bel tree. The chief mourner throws some earth on the body, and

<sup>1</sup> *Bombay Gazetteer*, Vol. XVIII, Part i, p. 442.

the others follow suit. The grave is then filled in with earth. The chief mourner fills the firepot with water, chips a small hole in its bottom with a stone, and wailing loudly and beating his mouth with the back of his hand the while, he carries the streaming pot three times round the grave and then dashes it to pieces. The mourners bathe in running water if it is available and return to the house. On entering each one sprinkles himself with cow's urine by means of a leafy branch of a neem tree, and he returns to his own home. On the third day after the burial a few relatives return to the grave, the chief mourner bearing on a winnowing fan two pieces of the kernel of a cocoanut on which molasses is poured. At the resting place on the way to the burying ground, where the rice and pebbles had been heaped, one piece of cocoanut is placed on the earth under the pebbles deposited there on the day of the burial. The other piece of cocoanut is placed on the grave. The mound of the grave is beaten down to the level of the rest of the ground. This done they return to the home of mourning. They sit there, each holding a neem branch under his arm. The chief mourner drops molasses into his mouth, and the visitors go home. On the seventh day a feast of bread and vegetable is given to the caste folk of the village.

The Mahars commemorate their dead in the dark half of the month of Bhadrapada following the ceremony of mahalaya when they feed crows and castemen.

The greeting which the Mahar uses to men of a higher caste is 'johar mayabapa.' This has been in use by them as far back as Marathi literature carries us. The meaning of the word, 'johar,' is not understood, and therefore there are legends which seek to explain its origin as a divine experience. The word is not confined to Mahars and Maharastra: it is also used by the Gonds and by the Santals.

In the Deccan when a Mahar takes a solemn oath he uses the name of a goddess named Bhadavi. This name does not seem to be known in Berar and in the Central Provinces though it occurs in the sanad granted at Mungi Paithan in the twelfth century. Sometimes the Mahar swears by a dog's tail, as the Kunbi does by the cow's tail.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE MAHAR IN MAHARASTRA

‘WHEREVER there is a town there is a Mahar quarter.’ A proverb of this form would have no idiomatic force in a metaphorical sense unless it had a semblance of truth in actuality. It is literally true that there is a Mahar quarter in every village within the bounds of that territory where the Marathi language is spoken; and the Mahar is thus located not because there are menial duties to be performed in every village, but because the very organization of the village community would be ineffective unless the duties of the Mahars were performed, and unless the privileges of the Mahars were conserved. The Maratha village community would have had a different history as well as a different form if the rights and functions of the Mahars were eliminated. Besides, the name ‘Mahar’ is not synonymous with menial servant; and there are far more Mahars in Maharashtra than are needed for menial service. The proverb which causes the sensitive Mahar to wince as if he were in truth a ‘black sheep,’ may indeed reflect to the enlightened mind the past glory of this folk: it may be taken literally to mean that the Mahars were so great a nation that their remnants are found in every town from Bhandara to the Arabian sea and from the Nerbada river to the middle of the Hyderabad State. They may be fragments of a folk that once owned these broad lands.

If the number of the Mahar people be considered in relation to the total population it appears that this ‘caste’ is most dense in the districts of Bhandara, Nagpur, Amraoti, Basim, Chanda, Akola, Ellichpur, Buldana, their numbers being from eighteen per cent to twelve per cent of the total

inhabitants of those districts. Reference to a map shows that these districts form one continuous tract of country south of the Satpura Hills, the greater part of it being the province of Berar. In that province taken as a whole the ratio of the Mahars to the total population is twelve per cent. They number ten per cent of the population of Betul which is north of Nagpur. They are thinner, but of fairly uniform density in a broad stretch of country extending from the south of Berar and the Central Provinces across the State of Hyderabad westwards to the Arabian Sea, and including the districts of Parbhani, Aurangabad, Khandesh, Nasik, Ahmednagar, Sholapur, Satara, Poona, Thana, Kolaba, Ratnagiri, Kolhapur. In this tract they form from nine per cent to five per cent of the population. They thin out to one per cent of the population in Dharwar.

The number of the Mahar folk taken absolutely is greatest in Nagpur where there are 1,25,000 in an area of 3,840 square miles or thirty-three to the square mile. In Bhandara they number 1,18,000 in an area of 3,965 square miles or about thirty to the square mile. Though the number is smaller in Bhandara than in Nagpur they are there much the largest group in the population. In Nagpur, Amraoti, Akola, Basim, Ellichpur, Gulbarga, Buldana, Parbhani they are, next to the Kunbis, markedly the largest class in the population. The Kunbis yield precedence in numbers to Marathas in districts such as Aurangabad, Ahmednagar, Satara, Poona, Ratnagiri; but in these districts, if the Kunbis and the Marathas be classed as one—as they well may be so far as occupation and economic standing go—the Mahars in these districts also may be counted second in point of number. The Gonds as well as the Kunbis outnumber the Mahars in the districts of Betul and Chanda; and in Khandesh the Bhils are more numerous than the Mahars. Similar variations occur in other districts. On the whole it may be said that in those parts wherein Marathi is the chief language the Mahars are next in point of numbers to the main agricultural class, whether it be called Kunbi or Maratha Kunbi. This relative prominence of the Mahars in point of numbers surely indicates that they are not simply a class determined by occupation. This inference is strengthened by other considerations

such as the variety of their subdivisions and the variety of their occupations in the districts where they are densest.

The most easterly point in the territory inhabited by the Mahars is the eastern limit of the Bhandara district  $89^{\circ}, 40'$  east, though there are groups of them to be found in the Raipur district. The most northerly point of the territory is in Betul  $22^{\circ}, 23'$  north. The northern boundary is an irregular line running from this limit of Betul through Khandesh  $22^{\circ}$  north to Arabian Sea. This line corresponds roughly with the line of the Satpura range of hills. The most southerly part of the Ratnagiri district  $15^{\circ}, 44'$  north may be taken as the southern limit of the land of the Mahars. On the southern boundary and on the eastern there are no very prominent physical features to determine the bounds of their habitation as there are on the north and the west. But on all sides it is notable that the boundaries of the Mahars correspond very closely with the boundaries of the Marathi language. The groups of Mahars found in the Raipur district speak Marathi in their homes, the prevailing language of the district being a form of Hindi. A few Mahars, it is true, speak Telangi and Tamil and others speak Hindi. The Dhedas in the west and north talk Gujarati. But on the whole the Mahars are a Marathi speaking people, and the name, 'Mahar', seems to be of Marathi origin. As one passes forth of the bounds of Maharashtra one finds the names, Dheda, Mehra, and Holiya, applied to those who perform the menial offices which are required of Mahars. In cases such as the districts of Betul and Seoni where Hindi is the prevalent language, there may appear to research a historical reason for the presence of Mahars in those parts.

There can be little doubt that from the points of view of the density of the Mahar folk and of the complexity of their caste divisions and of the basic economic nature of their occupation, the centre of the Mahar people is Nagpur. Round this centre as the home of the people we have to group Bhandara to the east, Chanda to the south and Amraoti to the west. This fact throws light on the name, Nagpur. Some facetious person has given currency to the absurdity that the city of Nagpur owes its name to a small serpentine stream

that serves as an open sewer. Some person whose memory of Sanskrit lapsed for a moment has given the Nagpur University a cobra as its totem, as if the name of the city means the place of snakes. There are reasons philological as well as ethnographical to suppose that Nagpur is the city of the Naka people. Naka is one of the honorific affixes applied to the names of Mahars in olden times, as for example Vitthunak, Dhondunak. The Panwars in the Central Provinces reckon the Mahars as earlier inhabitants of these provinces than they are themselves.

When the Census Officer adds together the returns of all the Mahar folk, they appear a people of size and significance. In the Census Report of 1891 and of 1901 they numbered just under three million souls. Their total number increased by over four hundred thousand in the year 1911. But in 1921 their number sank to just over three million. In 1931 they numbered just under three and a half million. They are more numerous than tribes like the Santals, the Gonds and the Bhils. Their number is just under half that of the Marathas. The Mahars are five times as numerous as the Mangs, the class which is counted their rivals in village rights and in untouchability.

The civil condition of the Mahars marks them as almost unique in India. The proportion of females to males is much larger than that in the country as a whole. In most of the castes and tribes of India there are more males than there are females, but among the Mahars there are more females than there are males. While this is true in the country as a whole and specially in Bombay and in the Central Provinces, it is not true in the Hyderabad State where the Mahar people are like the rest of the population deficient in females.

If the predominance of males over females in the country as a whole gives the Census officers occasion for speculation, there is surely more room for wonder regarding the exceptional case of the Mahars. But speculation is vain and fruitless in this connexion unless we have true birth statistics and unless we understand what factors determine sex. It is hardly pure speculation, however, to note that while males do not lapse from caste status by transgression, it is not unknown for women to gravitate into the Maharwada because of sexual

aberrations. One has seen even a Brahman woman living in a Maharwada. But it can hardly be that the number of women who lapse from other castes through social sin is sufficient to affect the proportion of women to men in the Mahar caste.

Because of the predominance of the number of females it is not surprising that in Bombay and in the Central Provinces and Berar there are more married women than there are married men, a fact which proves that lowliness of social status and poverty are no bar to polygamy. The disposition to indulge in polygamy is proved by the fact that in Hyderabad where the women are not in excess over men in numbers, there are yet more married women than there are married men. In spite of the fact that women are in the majority there are thirty-six thousand men between the ages of twenty and forty who are unmarried. Perhaps connected with that fact is the fact that there are half the number of women unmarried between the ages of twenty and forty. The number of unmarried Mahar women is least in the Central Provinces and Berar where the population is greatest and where the occupations of the people encourage polygamy as economically profitable. The number of unmarried women is greatest in Hyderabad, but the proportion of unmarried women to the total number of women is greatest in the Bombay Presidency. If the Mahars be compared with the Kunbis and the Marathas in this matter one cannot avoid the inference that there is something very abnormal in the sexual life of the Mahar people.

Whether that abnormality is to be explained by the surplus number of females combined with poverty, one cannot say. But the matter is one that calls for further investigation on the part of the leaders of the Mahar folk and of those who are concerned with their moral and social uplift. Similar reflections are stirred by the thought that one out of every four girls under the age of fifteen years is married; but in this respect the Mahar is no worse than his neighbours. From the point of view of social morality this early marriage is an evil, one happily no longer permissible by law, even if that law be a dead letter. But it must be admitted by all who know village life that the social evil of early marriage was



often a reflection of individual morality on the part of anxious parents, however little credit it did to males as a whole.

Mahars speak of themselves as divided into a number of *zata* or castes. These number twelve and a half according to a Marathi idiom, which is used also of the sects or *piths* in which men seek access to the god of Pandhari. One can see why the number twelve should stand for a whole round number. There are twelve months in the year; day and night are divided into twelve hours; there were twelve tribes in Israel; there were twelve Apostles in the early Christian Church. But the half—? Whence does it come as it so often does in Marathi idioms? The Brahmanas are sub-divided by fives—five Dravida and the five Gauda—and there is no suggestion of a half caste among them. Five was seen to be a sacred number in Mahar and Kunbi birth and other ceremonies. The truth is that the addition of the half in those idioms of the Marathi language stands for a note of contempt. There were three and a half wise men, for example; and a man may be too wise by half when he is a fool. One is not aware of the use of the term twelve and a half in any connexion but the Mahars and the Pandharpur sects.

It is very significant that the Mahar castes and the Pandharpur sects should share in idiom that breathes contempt. But what is the half caste over and above the round number? The question is sometimes put to a foreigner to test his knowledge of the folk mind and of the social order. The answer is the obvious one that the half caste is just made up of half castes, the offspring of inter-marriages which are against the tribal marriage law. In Nagpur, where this half caste occurs in appreciable numbers, it bears the name, Dharmika, that is moral or religious, a fact which betrays a fine sense of irony if not of humour, in the folk mind. In Khandish the Goptals are counted half caste. In Nasik the distinction belongs to the Rati. The half sect among the worshippers of Vithoba of Pandharpur is the Manbhava who are spitefully named Mangbhava on the supposition that their founder was a child of a forbidden marriage. The Brahmanas have a traditional fear of the Manbhava sect.

When one seeks from Mahars themselves for an enumera-

tion of their twelve classes one finds that while everybody knows the number, no one can name them all because so many as twelve are seldom found in any one district. But most intelligent men can name half a dozen of the larger sections. On the other hand when one correlates all the names found in all the districts from Thana right across to Nagpur one discovers more than twelve and a half distinct classes. Indeed one finds more than fifty names of fragments of this people as distinct from names of families or kula. The names of the chief classes are:—Somasi or Somawanshi, Daule, Pans, Silvan, Surti, Anantakulya, Bavise, Bel, Sirsal-kar, Bawane, Barake Andhavansa, Ladavansa, Kosare, Pazini, Dharmika, Mhali, Tilwans. Some of these names are manifestly designations of occupation: for example, the Kosare are spinners of kosa silk, the Pazini are those who sized the yarn and prepared it for the weaver's beam. There is, however, a tradition that the Pazini were so named because they were water carriers in the army of Rawana. Some of the names in use are clearly geographical indicating sections of the people who derive from certain parts of the country, for example there are Gondwana Mahars and in the Khandesh district there are Konkanya. Others of the names such as Ladwan, Andwan, Surti, may be territorial though there are legends which trace for example the Ladwans to a breach of the marriage law. One gets the impression that the Somawanshi are the most numerous class, and in ancient poems and sanadas the name, eighteen lakhs of Somawanshi, seems to mean the whole Mahar population. The Somawanshi are found in Kolaba, Thana, Nasik, Poona, Ahmednagar, Sholapur, Khandesh, Amraoti. The Ladawansa are found in Nasik, Aurangabad, Jalna, Khandesh, Nagpur. The Bawane form a large proportion of the folk in Nagpur and Bhandara; and a similar remark may be made of the Barake and the Kosare. A village in Ahmednagar produces Mahars of the surname Suryawanshi but there is no evidence that this is any more than a family or kula name. In Satara there are Murali, Gawai and Jogti Mahars, classes said to have arisen in fornication. But in the opinion of some Mahars these are just names of Kula. An interesting class name found in Khandesh is the Holar or Huvala, interesting because of its

likeness to the holeya, an untouchable class of the Karnatic. In the Indore State those who perform the village duties and enjoy the rights which Mahars have in other parts, are named Bullaee.

When the Mahars were soldiers in the British regiments their names ended in the affix nak. This is often taken from the Sanskrit root, *ninaya*, 'to lead,' and as being the same as naik, a name of subordinate rank still used in the Army. But that derivation, though supported by Molesworth's great *Dictionary*, cannot be accepted without question. All the Mahars who fell at Koregaon were not leaders, yet the termination 'nak' occurs in many of the names inscribed on the monument which commemorates the battle. These affixes are intermixed with the terminations 'mhetara' and 'pauta', the latter two indicating men of the Chamar and of the Mang castes respectively.

May not the term nak be a remnant of an ancient tribal name? The Marathi language has the word, *nagawane*, meaning 'to rob.' For example, *Nagya uagavila ani Tukya uzavala*, which may be rendered freely, 'Peter was robbed to pay Paul' The name as tribal may be totemistic, the naga (cobra or perhaps the elephant) being the totemistic animal. It should be noted however that neither the elephant nor the cobra could have been known to the earliest speakers of Sanskrit if the Aryan culture came from the North, and it is likely enough that the names came into Sanskrit when the animals became known to the Aryans; and it was only an accident in sound that the root meaning to 'lead' corresponded with those forest names for the chief serpent and the chief mammal. The Mahars themselves have a tradition that their first king was named Naga. This may be a folk memory of the Naga dynasty which once held sway over what is now known as Maharashtra.

The appellative Mahar has itself given rise to much philological speculation. The folk tradition has many crude legends to explain the name. The only scientific derivation which demands attention is that offered by a great and noble scholar, the late Sir Ramakrishna Bhandarkar. Speaking to a conference of the Depressed Classes Mission in Poona in the year 1912, that broadminded man quoted among a number

of Sanskrit texts a passage from the *Markandeya Purana* where the word, *Mrtahara*, occurs as the name of a caste. *Mrtahara* means the dragger away of the dead. *Mrtahara* gives us Mahar. To this the answer may be returned, if the name is of Sanskrit origin how did it come to be adopted universally by a people of many divisions and many occupations, a people to whom Sanskrit was unknown more or less? Further if the name is Sanskrit why is it not found with this meaning in other parts of India besides Maharastra where the village economy required the removal of dead animals by a special class of people? Sanskrit is behind the Hindi language as it is behind the Marathi, but there are no Mahars as an untouchable class in other parts of India. The name, Mahar, does indeed occur in the Panjab and in Rajaputana, but it bears the meaning of 'honourable.' 'Both in the Panjab and in Rajaputana the title of respect to a Gujar is Mahar, Mihir or Mir.'<sup>1</sup>

May not the name, Mahar, be an ancient folk one as the people themselves think? May not the Mahars be in name as in physiological characters a part of the ancient people which gives its name to the country Maharastra? If the name, Maharastra, is to mean the great nation or the great charioteer, what an empty boast it makes! Surely there were great charioteers in other parts of India and other peoples who thought themselves great though they were too ashamed to vaunt themselves as such. As Dr. John Wilson pointed out in his essay prefixed to Molesworth's *Dictionary*, it is not at all inconceivable that the names Mahar and Rastra combined into Maharastra just as Gujar and Rastra make Gujarat. This derivation of the name, Maharastra, has been discussed and indignantly refuted by a learned contribution to the *Transactions* of the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society.<sup>2</sup>

The hypothesis that the name, Maharastra, is derived from Mahar tallies with another appellative used of the Mahar. The name, *Chokha*, is synonymous with Mahar, and it means 'excellent.' The Mang caste preserves for its own use a

<sup>1</sup> *Bombay Gazetteer*, Vol. IX, Part 1, p. 493.

<sup>2</sup> Vide Journal No. LXX, pp. 621 ff.

vocabulary in which the name for Mahar is *Bhukari*. The word is used in tones of merry contempt. The original meaning of this word is also obscure. It may mean 'tiller of the land,' or 'dweller on the land,' being parallel to the term *hhudeva* which is commonly used of Brahmans. This Mang word may belong to the same class in meaning as the term *dharaniche puta*, 'sons of the soil,' another synonym for Mahar commonly used in the Ahmednagar district. Another of this class of names is the word *parwari*. It was used commonly and politely to describe the Mahar folk in the early days of British rule in Bombay and the Deccan; but some modern Mahars say that it is an objectionable word. If it means the person who has a right to the grain left about the threshing floor, and if it is also the word, *παραρὸν ἄρον*, used by the Greeks who traded with the Bombay coast at the beginning of the Christian era, we may infer that the Mahars are revealed by it also as an ancient people whose modern perquisites are derived from ancient natural rights. Some would derive the word *parwari* from *pattawari*.

The conclusion on the matter in so far as names are concerned may well be stated in the words of Viscount Bryce: 'No branches of historical enquiry have suffered more from fanciful speculation than those which relate to the origin and the attributes of the races of mankind. The differentiation of these races began in prehistoric darkness, and the more obscure a subject is so much the more fascinating. Hypotheses are tempting because though it may be impossible to verify them, it is in the paucity of data equally impossible to refute them.'<sup>1</sup>

However we may regard the meaning and the history of the various caste and sub-caste names, there can be no doubt that the Mahar folk has been shaped into that form of society which is characteristic of Brahmanism. The Somawanshi are not only the most numerous, but they count themselves the chief class; they dine with the Ladawansa. The Bawane do not dine with the Ladawansa. The Somawanshi do not dine with the Bawane, because the latter eat the flesh of the pig. The Bawane eat with the Kosare. The Barake are not

<sup>1</sup> *Race Sentiment as a Factor in History.*

allowed to eat with any other Mahars or to draw water from their wells. No Mahar will take food from the Mhali, but the Mhali takes food from all other Mahars.

The various sub-castes seem to be strictly endogamous, except in the Sholapur district, that is a member of one sub-caste does not marry into another subcaste.

Besides these larger groups which may be called castes or sub-castes there are sub-divisions into *kula* or *gotra* each of which has a clan name, and there is evidence that each *kula* has a *devaka* or godling which is represented by a small metal *taka* or plate bearing the likeness of the clan totem. Devakas as a rule are animals such as the buffalo, the tortoise, the mouse-deer, the crab, the cobra, the peacock and trees such as the umbar, the palm, the nandruk, the mango, the champā. The Suryawanshi curiously enough have the sunflower as *devake*. These *taka* are now becoming obsolete and their place is taken at wedding seasons, when their use was judged most urgent, by the *panchpawali* or bunch of five leaves. Marriage is forbidden between parties who have the same *kuladevaka*. In the jargon of science the castes or *zata* are endogamous, while the *kula* or clans are exogamous.

The *kula* or clans are very numerous. There are fifty-seven named in the Central Provinces and double that number in the Bombay Presidency. Some groups which have different surnames have the same *devaka*. Many of the Mahar surnames belong to Kunbis and some are the names of Brahman families. Surnames shared with the Marathas and the Kunbis are such as Bhonsle, Jadhava, Gaikwad, Pawar, Shelke, Shinde, Thorat. Surnames borne by Mahars and Brahmans are such as Chitale, Gadre, Joshi, Lokhande, Tambe. A few Mahar surnames are found among Katkaris, a primitive jungle tribe who live along the Western Ghats. Such names are Bhoi, Chavan, Dive, Waghmare, Waghchowre. In connexion with Mahar names there is a popular theory that in olden times the Mahars attached to certain families as hereditary servants assumed the names of their patrons. In Gujarat certain Dheda families seem to belong as property to rich landholder families; for on the death of the landholder they are distributed according to his will along with his fields. And there is a tradition that the

Dhedas and the Kunbis are descended from two brothers, Leva and Deva.<sup>1</sup>

It is difficult to determine the principle on which this sub-division of the Mahar folk has taken place; and until the true meanings of their names are discovered all hope of finding the *fundamentum divisionis* is vague and remote, except in a few cases. But the complexity of the sub-division, carrying us far back into antiquity, seems to warrant the inference already drawn that we have in the Mahars the remnant of an ancient people widely spread and divided into clans or tribes on whose social structure there supervened the organisation of Brahmanical society and culture.

The head measurements of the Mahar population have caused some perplexity in the minds of anthropologists. A trained observer measured one hundred members of each important caste throughout India. This work was carried out under the guidance of Sir Herbert Risley in whose book, *The People of India*, the results of observation are tabulated. The table which contains measurements of the Mahars (Appendix III, p. 397, 2nd edition, 1915), raises doubts in the mind of Mr. Enthoven who has studied the Bombay population as part of his work as Census Officer, and who has published a work on *The Castes and Tribes of Bombay*. In that book Mr. Enthoven observes, 'Risley was at one time inclined to the view that measurements recorded among the Marathas afforded evidence of their Scythic origin. He based this conclusion on the discovery of broad headed people in the Deccan. But measurements which bring together the Brahman and the Mahar require a great deal of collateral evidence from reliable sources before they can safely be used as the basis of a theory of racial origin.' Following this passage are two lists, based on Sir Herbert Risley's tables, of castes arranged according to their cephalic index and their nasal index; and Mr. Enthoven continues, 'It will be seen that in the first of these groups a low cephalic index is shared by the Mahar, one of the lowest castes of the Presidency, with the Deshastha and Chitpawana Brahmans. This is at least disconcerting. The Mahar would not be

<sup>1</sup> *Bombay Gazetteer*, Vol. IX, Part i.

expected in such strange company. . . . Mahars and Kolis must be as typical representatives of the early types in the Presidency as can well be found. Yet these measurements give them a place close to the Brahmans and even above the Deshastha. . . . If any theory at all is to be placed on the Risley tables it would seem to be that the tribes and castes of the Bombay Presidency are much more closely connected, racially, from the highest to the lowest, than history, tradition, customs and appearance have hitherto led us to suppose.<sup>1</sup>

Mr. Enthoven is hardly fair to the spirit of science. Sir Herbert Risley's figures show that the Mahar stands higher amid the Deshastha and the Konkanastha Brahmans in so far as the proportions of the head and of the nose are indications of affinity. The suggestion when first published drew as much scorn from the Brahmans in Poona as it elicits from Mr. Enthoven. But an impartial study of the Mahar in the Deccan village economy, in the political history of the Deccan, and in the history of Marathi religious literature, shows that the Mahar when he gets a fair chance is not unworthy to stand where Sir Herbert Risley's figures have placed him. If judgment is to be placed on appearance, surely our mental picture must be corrected, as a picture with crayons on canvas would be corrected by careful measurements of the face and cranium. And if tradition is to be a factor in the formation of judgment, then it must be regarded in its wholeness and in its many-sidedness. It is fairly well known that even literary tradition, of which the Brahmans are usually counted the guardians, reveals that the untouchable Chandala caste is sprung from a Brahman mother as the Matanga caste claims a Brahman father; and there are texts which assign privileges to the itinerant priest, as they enjoin duties on the devout householder, which permit the inference that transmission of family physiognomy must have been not unmixed.

The presence of Europeans in India has occasioned the formation of a large class of Anglo-Indians who under Brahmanism would have been relegated to the Maharwada,

<sup>1</sup> *Castes and Tribes of Bombay*, Vol. I, pp. xiv-xvi, First Edition 1920.



but who under a more compassionate and just regime have enjoyed the rights of their fathers. It is not improbable that similar race modifications occurred in the past and that then as now there remained with their mother's folk outside the village gate the sons and daughters of rulers.

The late Rev. Narayan Vaman Tilak, himself a Konkastha Brahman by birth, used to propound the hypothesis that the name Atisudra is synonymous with the name Mahar because this class is derived from the intercourse of high caste people and sudra: they were flung outside the village in the fear lest their very kinship should prove a social danger, just as half-caste families are feared and shunned by many Europeans in India. In proof of his hypothesis Mr. Tilak appealed to the evidence of feature and form in girls of Mahar origin who have been protected from the coarsening influence of servile labour and utter poverty by their upbringing in Christian schools. But this kind of hypothesis is like a two-edged sword. The Mahar and the Brahman may have heads and noses of similar proportions because the Brahman is Aryan more by superimposed culture than by persistence of race. The similarity may be due not to sexual promiscuity on the part of Brahmans and other higher castes, but to the fact that the Mahar and the Deshastha Brahman belong to the same ancient stock in greater or less degrees of purity. That is the legitimate inference from Sir Herbert Risley's tables, an inference which is indeed contemplated by Mr. Enthoven.

If we pass from the cranial and facial measurements of the typical Mahar to evidence of his mental capacity as revealed in his attitude to education, we are instantly face to face with statistics which show him to be very backward, if backwardness can be tabulated. In the Bombay Presidency 9,256 males and 589 females are literate. Of these 354 men and 7 women are literate in English. In the Central Provinces and Berar 15,647 males and 555 females are literate: of these 370 males and 3 females profess English. In Hyderabad 2,941 males and 252 females are literate, of whom 69 males and 7 females profess English. This means that nineteen males in every thousand and one female are literate in Marathi, while six males and one female in every

ten thousand can read and write English. That indicates great backwardness even as compared with the Marathas and Kunbis, much more as compared with the Brahmans. But the figures have to be correlated in the light of social rules and economic opportunity. It is the religious duty of the Brahman to be literate; and the caste as a whole is able to afford school fees or to beg them; education under such circumstances is self-propagating. If the Mahar capacity is to be compared with that of the Brahman in this matter it would be necessary to estimate the literacy of Christians of Mahar extraction, and to compare them with the Brahmans. In that case it would appear beyond doubt that the literacy backwardness of this people is due not to lack of capacity but to lack of opportunity and to the enervating influence of social customs; and the general impression received of classes in a village market place would be confirmed.

The mental capacity of an individual is not to be judged only by what is known as literacy. There is many a learned pandit who has little of that mental power which guides deft hands or which controls primitive impulses in situations of danger. Though the Mahars as a class have been condemned to supply the menial service in village life yet many of them who are not condemned to servile tasks are masters of useful crafts. In the Central Provinces they are spinners and weavers of cotton, producing fine fabrics not only in their homes after the manner of their fathers, but also in the mills of Nagpur and other industrial centres. In the Deccan many of them are skilled masons and some of them become masters of labour, showing the kind of ability which commands respect in the world. We have already seen that in the village community in ancient times as in modern days the Mahar fulfils functions which demand mental power of a high order. If function has much to do with the production of form it is no wonder that the Mahar has a cranial capacity similar to that of the Brahman. The Mahars have ancestral skill in the handling of horses too. In old days as in the present they have been useful sals. And so the Marathi tongue has one more proverb about the Mahar:—‘The Patil’s horse, and the Mahar’s ornament.’

## CHAPTER V

### THE MILITARY RECORD OF THE MAHARS

MAHAR spokesmen are not more proud of their service in the village communities than they are of the record of military service maintained by members of their caste in the regiments of the British East India Company. A conference of the Deccan Mahars held at Poona in November, 1910, addressed to the Secretary of State for India a petition that they might be employed 'in the lowest grades of the Public Services, in the ranks of police sepoy, and of soldiers in the Indian Army.' They maintain, 'We are making no new demands; we do not claim employment in services in which we have not been engaged before. Indeed some few of our people do still hold positions in the police force and have acquitted themselves most honourably. So also have our people been employed in the Indian Army from the very commencement of the British Raj in our country, and they have risen to the highest position by their valour and good conduct.' In proof of their capacity for military service they name men of their caste who had risen to the rank of officers and non-commissioned officers in the old Bombay regiments. In twenty infantry regiments and one marine corps there were eight Subhedar-Majors, sixty-two Subhedars and thirty four Jamadars. That is a remarkable record when account is taken of the social disadvantages which the Mahar sepoy had to contend with, and when due allowance is made for the quality of the Mohammedan soldiers and of the men of higher caste from North India who served in those regiments.

An impression persists in the minds of many that only the dregs of Indian society would take service as soldiers in the Bombay regiments of the East India Company. And there may be a *prima facie* ground for such an opinion; for in the

armies of the Maratha chiefs all the infantry were men of lower castes and were treated with disdain. The pure Maratha warrior rode on horseback; and for each horseman there were two foot soldiers, one who attended to the animal and another who cut grass or other fodder for it. These foot soldiers or *paik* must have been of the Mahar and Mang castes.

The Mahar footman was known as Nak, and the Mang footman as Raut. The Maratha artillery was dragged along by large teams of bullocks, and there may have been room for outcastes by the yokes of those teams. A field officer of the British Army describes the Maratha soldiers of the armies which joined the Bombay Army under Major-General Abercromby in the campaign against Seringapatam in 1791. They 'were remarkably plain but neat in their appearance. Mild in their aspect, humane in their disposition, polite and unaffected in their address, they are distinguished by obedience to their chiefs and attachment to their country. . . . The Maratha infantry . . . is composed of black Christians, and despicable poor wretches of the lowest caste, uniform in nothing but the bad state of their musquets, none of which are either clean or complete; and few are provided with either ammunition or accoutrements. They are commanded by half-caste people of Portuguese and French extraction, who draw off the attention of spectators from the bad clothing of their men by the profusion of antiquated lace on their own. . . . The Mahrattas do not appear to treat their infantry with more respect than they deserve, as they ride through them without any ceremony on the march, and on all occasions evidently consider them as foreigners, and a very inferior class of people and troops.'<sup>1</sup>

When the East India Company began to enlist sepoy's it did so through Indian officers of good caste. Sir John Malcolm writing in the year 1816 to the Secretary of the India Board says that the Bombay Army 'has from its origin to the present day been indiscriminately composed of all classes, Mohammedans, Hindoos, Jews and some few Chris-

<sup>1</sup> *A Narrative of the Campaign in India*, by Major Dirom of His Majesty's Forces in India, 1793.

tians. Among the Hindoos those of the lowest tribes of Mahrattas and the Purwarree, Surtee, and Frost sects are much more numerous than the Rajpoots and higher castes.<sup>1</sup> Manifestly the constituents of the Company's Bombay Infantry Regiments must have been drawn from classes such as filled the infantry ranks of the armies of Purseram Bhaw and Hurry Pant before Seringapatam, except that the Purwarree or Mahars mentioned by General Malcolm came from the coast south of Bombay while the Maratha Paik must have been recruited above the Western Ghats. 'The first sepoys of the Company were raised and commanded by native officers acting under the authority and direction of a European officer; but still exercising great influence and power over their men whom they brought to the service. Those officers long continued to be the medium on which we relied for the fidelity and attachment of the sepoys, who saw in them men of high caste and superior character, of their own country, at whose call they had embraced the service of strangers.'<sup>2</sup>

There seems to be a marked contrast between the conduct of good caste officers in the Company's service and those in the purely Hindu services in so far as the treatment of out-caste sepoys goes. It is remarkable in the first place that men of good caste accepted service under foreign officers. The fact is a testimony to their good sense and to the good manners of the European officers. It is still more remarkable that men of an untouchable caste should have attained the rank of subheddar-major in those regiments. Such subheddar-majors must have been of superior military rank to many officers who belonged to higher social classes than they. Is it not very probable that this subordination of caste prejudice to regimental discipline is largely responsible for the fact that the infantry of the Company's Bombay regiments became superior in prowess and steadiness to the mounted troops of the Peshwa? There was not much required of these early sepoys in the matter of military training. 'A jacket of English broad cloth made up in the shape of his

<sup>1</sup> *The Government of India*, 1833, Appendix E, pp. 208, 209.

<sup>2</sup> Sir John Malcolm, *Political History of India*, 1811, p. 510.

own dress, the knowledge of his manual exercises and a few military evolutions, constituted the original sepoy; and with this art, and his English firearms, he was found to possess an incalculable superiority over the other natives of India who ignorant of the first principles of discipline (which enable men to act in a body) were easily defeated, however great their numbers, by a small corps of their brothers, armed, disciplined and directed by the art, intelligence and spirit of their European leaders.'<sup>1</sup> Great is the power of morale; and morale is hardly compatible with caste prejudice.

The Mahar sepoys of the Bombay Army deserve to share in a general way the high praise bestowed on that army by men who spent their lives on the field in the days of India's travail. Whether they had to endure the rigours of difficult marches when rations were low and disease was rampant among men and transport animals; whether trial came upon them when besieged or when prisoners of war and they went without food in order to supplement the rations of their European officers and comrades in arms; whether they faced the chance of open battle on their own plains and in the storming of fortresses, they were worthy of their officers and of their European comrades. But in particular the Mahar folk cherish the memory of the fight at Koregaon on the 1st January, 1818, when the flower of Maratha chivalry, in retreat it is true, but by no means broken, swooped in many thousands upon a force of 600 rank and file, which was on the march from Sirur to Kirkee. There were just about two dozen European gunners and a few European officers in that small body of 600 outcastes which entrenched itself in the village of Koregaon when the Peshwa's army fell upon it. For twelve weary hours a hand to hand conflict was maintained until many were slain and wounded on both sides. The victory lay with the small British force. The heroism of that day is commemorated on the monument which stands on the bank of the sacred Bhima where the Poona-Ahmednagar Road crosses the river. The Mahar names on the monument may be recognised by the termination—nak; and they are not a few.

<sup>1</sup> Malcolm, *Political History of India*, p. 489.

The Europeans who pass along Waudby Road, Bombay, on their way to the Gymkhana or to Church seldom pause to read the tablet which explains the name of the street. But the story on the tablet might hold entranced even a wedding guest. It runs as follows: 'This Road is named after Major Sidney James Waudby who with Private Elahi Bux and Private Sonnak Tannak, all of the 19th Bombay Infantry, fell on the 16th April, 1880, in defence of the Dubrai post in Afghanistan which, when warned that an attack in force was imminent, they refused to abandon and most gallantly held for three hours against three hundred of the enemy, many of whom were slain. Eventually when all their ammunition was expended they dashed into the midst of their foes and died fighting. In honour of their heroism this tablet is placed by the Regiment.' The odds were greater than at Koregaon; and the heroes were of the same classes as made up the early Bombay regiments, a European, a Moslem and a Mahar.

There are no Mahars in the Indian Army now, unless they be employed as sals in the field artillery or as motor mechanics in the armoured car units. But an attempt was made during the great world war to embody a battalion of such men. The response to the recruiting officer was slow, and it was mostly Konkani Mahars in the present as in the past who enlisted. Two companies of them were trained alongside of two companies of Panjab Christians. They formed the 71st—111th regiment; but they were not required on any battlefield though they attained a high standard of discipline and of athletic efficiency. In education and in physique the two wings of the regiment were unequal. It is significant that the Army could find comradeship for the Mahars only among Christians. The regiment was disbanded at the end of the war.

Well may a disinterested student of Indian history ask, Why did the Bombay regiments cease to recruit Mahars? The answer which comes most readily to mind is that caste prejudice on the part of Maratha soldiers made it difficult to maintain discipline and *esprit de corps* and commissariat efficiency in a complex modern army, if untouchables be in the ranks. But the easy and obvious answer is not the whole

truth; and the spirit of history demands that the truth be faced.

The facing of the truth demands a retrospect of the history of the Bombay regiments. There were in the first sepoy battalions but few European officers. A captain, an adjutant, with a sergeant to each company was the original establishment. Commands frequently fell to soubahdars and jema-dars.<sup>1</sup> The European officers were selected for command in Indian units because of meritorious service in the European regiments of the East India Company. The qualities which commended them for promotion of this kind were their command of the vernacular of the Indian troops, their acquaintance with the customs and manners of the people of the land, and their military skill. Sir John Malcolm remarks, 'I never knew an instance of unkind and gross behaviour to the natives of India in a person acquainted with their language and manners.' Those European officers became 'father and mother' to their men, and to the Indian officers. 'It was remarked under this system that though many of the corps were brought to a great perfection of dress and discipline, there was hardly an instance in which this was done at the expense of the temper of the men.'<sup>2</sup> There was a great change effected in the year 1796 when a large complement of European officers was posted to each regiment now formed of two battalions. This was probably designed for greater efficiency, but it resulted in the holding back of deserving Indian officers from positions of responsible command. Alongside of the Company's regiments recruited from Britain there was also a certain proportion of King's troops. Gradually this proportion increased. After the final overthrow of Napoleon many of the officers who had attained field rank in Europe had little hope of further promotion and of active service; and they transferred their service to the King's regiments in India. They were senior in rank to officers in the Company's units, and they gradually superseded in command of units and especially in the control of policy, the officers who had

<sup>1</sup> Malcolm, *Government of India*, p. 490.

<sup>2</sup> Malcolm, *ibid*, p. 493.



come to India at an early age and had grown up in the land. What European officers in the Company's service in 1796 did to Indian officers of that time, King's Army officers at a later period did to the Company's officers. That is to say, the amount of military service may have increased in India, but the amount of understanding of the Sepoy mind did not increase; and there was a dwindling number of Indian officers who had reason to be proud of their British connexion. Wise soldier-statesmen like the friends, Sir Thomas Munro and Sir John Malcolm, both of whom began their Indian career before they were twenty years of age, and advanced through labour and fighting from rank to rank until they were Governors of Madras and Bombay respectively, foresaw this trend of military affairs and protested vigorously against the superseding of responsible and honourable Indian officers. There seems to be little doubt that if the temper of such statesmen, their manners and their sympathetic understanding of the mind of the Indian people, had been copied the Sepoy revolt of 1857 might never have happened.

While changes were taking place in the commissioned ranks of the Indian regiments there was going on a change in the *esprit de corps* of those regiments. It had always been the policy of officers of the Bombay regiments to have men of a number of castes in their ranks. During the war with the Peshwa there was a marked increase in the proportion of Rajput and Hindustani sepoys in the Bombay regiments, and after the defeat of the Peshwa the Bombay Army came more and more into touch with the northern regiments. In the Hindustani regiments the men put caste before the regiment. In the old Bombay units soldiers belonged to a regiment rather than to caste. As the change in the character and the experience of the officers was taking place there was working in the Bombay regiments a change of devotion from the corps to the caste. This was almost inevitable since the warlike classes who used to form both an army and a caste must needs find employment in Bombay units.

Along this line of study will be found the main reason for the exclusion of Mahars from the ranks of Bombay regiments when after 1857 the Imperial Government found it desirable

for reasons of economy and of military policy to reduce the number of Indian regiments.

Furthermore there happened in the Civil Government a process parallel to that which occurred in the Bombay Army. The district officer who does the real work of administration and who knows the people because he moves among them and listens to their petitions, has occasion to appreciate the local knowledge possessed by the Mahar and his mental quickness. But there has been a tendency to honour the Secretariate staff more than the man in the district. The officer who spends his days sitting at a bureau cannot be expected to see any political power in a caste of field labourers and weavers and village messengers and masons and roadmenders, even though they have a fine military record. One has heard over and over again the remark that the Mahar has no political significance. The remark just proves that the maker of it has little memory and little understanding of such events as the battle of Koregaon. The mind which suffers from such frailties is hardly fitted to retain the empire given to it.

But circumstances are changing rapidly in the political world, and rival communities, Moslems, Hindus, Sikhs see in the Mahar vote something of potential value when the form of Government is democratic.

Mahar sepoys had not a little to do with the establishment of British dominion in India, as Mahar servants had not a little to do with the possibility of European domestic life in India. The British failure to remember this may not be a cause or even an occasion, but it is manifestly a concomitant of the decline of that dominion.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE MAHAR MIND IN CULT AND IN LEGEND

IN almost every village of the Deccan, and in many villages of the Central Provinces on the Eastern fringe of the dwellings and alongside the Maharwada is a shrine of the goddess Mariai who is sometimes named Laxmi. She is represented by a row of small amorphous stones smeared with red lead. It is hard to say whether this godling performs any public service except in days when cholera or bubonic plague or smallpox ravages the populace. But her shrine always bears evidence of constant attention. And it is not the outcastes alone who go in fear of her wrath. She must be propitiated publicly at a time of pestilence. It is a sign of the prevalence of some dread disease when one meets her devotees parading the streets. They present a weird appearance. The dominating figure is that of a man who has long hair falling on his shoulders and very ample skirts as of a woman flouncing about ankles on which are many tinkling ornaments. His face is smeared red in spots with vermilion; round his neck hang chain upon chain of cowrie shells; and on his shoulder is an enormous plaited whip of hempen cords. Attending on this fierce figure may be one or more women, wild-eyed and with dishevelled hair and chewing neem leaves as they dance. Now and again a woman falls prostrate in a swoon, perhaps intoxicated by the neem leaves; and the bystanders wait with bated breath for any words she may utter. It is Mariai who is in possession of the prostrate form and who speaks through the half-conscious lips. Sometimes at fairs, for example in the courts of the temple of Khandoba at Jejuri in the Poona district, the man of the

whip is seen whirling himself into a frenzy which is considered divine; and the loud cracks of his heavy whip sound to the simple villager remarkable if not miraculous. The goddess resides in the whip. The whip bearer is named *Potrāja* in the Deccan, but that name is not known in the Nagpur and the Bhandara districts.

One often finds *potraja* boys in schools where outcaste children are received. One recognises them by their long hair which has never been shorn. The usual explanation given of the long hair is that it is a token of a vow made by the boy's parents. Their children may have been dying in infancy and they made a solemn vow to *Mariai* that if they received a boy who survived they would dedicate him to the service of the goddess. Such boys are seen in schools in the Central Provinces, but there it is to *Mahadeva* that they are dedicated; and it is said that they are expected one day to devote themselves to the god by hurling their bodies over the precipices in the *Mahadeva* hills. These devotees seem to be mostly of the *Mahar* caste.

The name, *potraja*, is explained as follows in the *Dharwar* volume of the *Bombay Gazetteer*:—"Potrajas or buffalo kings are a class of *Holayas*. The story of the origin of their name is that their ancestor in the disguise of a Brahman became the husband of *Dayamava*, an incarnation of the goddess *Laxami*. They lived together for several years and had children. At *Dayamava*'s request the *Holaya* brought his mother to the home. As they were eating some of *Dayamava*'s sweetmeats the mother said to her son, "How like this is to a roasted buffalo tongue." *Dayamava*, finding how she had been deceived and degraded, burnt her house, slew her children, and pursuing her husband who had become a buffalo, killed him. The descendants of the husband are called *potrajas*, that is, buffalo kings. They are a small body and are found in only a few villages. On *Dayamava*'s fairs which last for eight days, the *potrajas* are sent for. On one of the eight days several male buffaloes representing the *Holaya* who married *Dayamava* and a number of sheep representing his children, are slaughtered before the deity. The officiating *potraja* tears open the throat of a lamb with his teeth and drinks its blood. On the last day of the fair, in a state of

stark nakedness, he carries cooked rice on his head all round the village throwing away a little and slaughtering a sheep at each of its corners. On his return he receives a large share of the slaughtered buffaloes and sheep. In other respects the potrajas do not differ from Holayas.<sup>1</sup>

Manifestly this Karnatic ceremony and the connected legend belong to the same religious tradition as the worship of Mariai as that is practised by villages in the Sholapur district, and also in parts of Poona; and the name potraja as applied to the devotee of Mariai is shown to be of southern origin.

The following description of a buffalo sacrifice is found in the Sholapur volume of the *Bombay Gazetteer*.<sup>2</sup> 'When cholera rages in a village the people raise a subscription and hand the money to the headman. The headman brings a robe and a bodice, some rice and flour, a he-buffalo or a sheep and flowers, camphor, frankincense, red powder, betel-nut and leaves. He takes three carts through the village accompanied by music and a band of the villagers. The carts then go to the Mahars' quarters outside the village where is the shrine of Mariai, the cholera goddess. The headman and the other villagers stand at a distance while the Mahar bathes the goddess, dresses her in the robe and bodice, fills her lap with rice, betel-nuts, dry dates and a cocoanut, waves burning frankincense and camphor before her and with joined hands begs her to be kind. All the villagers lift their joined hands to their heads and ask the goddess to be kind and retire leaving the Mahars and the Mangs. The buffalo is led in front of the goddess and a Mahar chops off its head with a sword or a hatchet and touches the goddess' lap with a finger dipped in its blood. The cartloads of food and meat are shown to the goddess and are distributed among such of the villagers as do not object to eat them. This concludes the sacrifice.'

In Berar a buffalo is sacrificed at the Dasera festival. The patil wounds the animal on the nose with a sword and the chief Mahar kills it.<sup>3</sup> In certain districts it is the Mang who slays the buffalo. But the Mahars claim to have the right to perform all ceremonies connected with Mariai or Laxmi.

<sup>1</sup> Vol. XXII, p. 217.

<sup>2</sup> *Bombay Gazetteer*, Vol. XX, p. 177.

<sup>3</sup> *Berar Census Report*, 1881, p. 143.

This right is named in the sanad given to them at Mungi Paithan and within the temple of Eknath Swami. In that sanad the Mangs are explicitly forbidden to serve these deities.

While Mahars have this peculiar interest in the worship of Mariai they have also a general interest in most of the members of the Hindu pantheon and especially such as have been adopted into Brahmanism from the aboriginal cults. Many of the Murali and the Waghya devotees of Khandoba of Jejuri are drawn from the Mahar caste, but it is Ramoshi who are most devoted to Khandoba, though he is the family deity of some noble Brahman houses such as the Purandhare family.

In the Poona and the Ahmednagar districts a goddess named Bhadavi is held in great awe by the Mahars whose most solemn oath is in her name. I have not found any knowledge of this deity or any use of her name in solemn adjuration anywhere in the Central Provinces. But in Poona and in Ahmednagar a Mahar would die rather than give a false promise knowingly in the name of Bhadavi. They are very reticent regarding this goddess and the manner of her worship. Having learned of the power of her name I failed many times to find out about her worship until I probed by guile into the subconscious mind of an old Mahar near Ahmednagar. In his wide awake mood this man flatly denied all knowledge of the worship of Bhadavi, but when he was weary beyond self-control, at the end of a long day of shikar, he told me the following: A stone or brass image of this goddess is never seen; but in the month of Bhadrapada the people fashion dough images of her. These images have the human form. They are fashioned at night; and they are eaten at night and at dawn. The worshippers enquire of the image regarding the coming of rain. A lamp of flour is made and is filled with melted butter in which a simple wick floats. The wheaten image of the goddess is placed before this lamp. The enquiry regarding rain is understood to be answered in this way:—having worshipped the image the ministrant asks, 'Will rain fall?' He then allows water to drip on the burning wick. If the flame is quenched the answer is 'No': if it goes on burning the answer is 'Yes'.

The Mahars alone worship this goddess; but the Marathas are very liberal in their gifts of flour and melted butter for the making of the images and of the lamp. This deity comes into being in the month of Bhadrapada. It is said that in old days when performing this ceremony they used to sacrifice a cow, and the oil which fed the lamp before the image was made of the fat of the cow.

This secret ceremony and the folk memory connected with it would indicate that the use of the cow's flesh as food is more than a matter of custom and name among the Mahars. It is significant that the Marathas contribute to the ceremony though they do not take part in it. There was a time when the ancient Aryans sacrificed cattle and ate their flesh. And in an Upanishada there lives the story of the transition from the animal to the plant-sacrifice. May it not be that in his everyday life the Mahar is continuing the ancient Vedic cow-sacrifice, and that in the worship of Bhadavi he is observing the more modern sacrifice which was devised by the Aryan philosophic mind, perhaps inspired by Buddhism which taught at the same time the doctrine of ahimsa which persists in the Warkari sect? The compound word *Mahura-Bhadavi* is used to name the gifts made to the Mahars to meet their expenses in worshipping the goddess in the month of Bhadrapada.

Demons and evil spirits plague the minds of many Kunbis and lower caste people. A Marathi proverb says that 'the Kunbi died of a ghost, the Brahman of flatulence and the goldsmith of bile.' The king of all the ghosts and demons is Vetala. His form is that of a man rather fierce of aspect. His hands and feet are turned backwards. In his right hand he carries a cane (*veta*) and in his left a conch shell. The name, Vetala, is said to be derived from the word for a cane. But the special name for the cane which can be used for the exorcism of ghosts is *pandhari*. Vetala is attended by a number of serving spirits. They are visible at midnight on no-moon and on full-moon nights, and especially on Mahasivaratri, Holi and Dasera when they are worshipped. The temples of Vetala are circles of unhewn stones which are whitewashed and tipped with red lead. There are many of these throughout the Deccan still in use; and the ministrant

at them is usually a Mahar. The stones of the circles are the seats on which Vetala and his attendants sit. This may be the explanation of a belief of the Gonds that whoso sits on a stone may be a devil. Brahmanism seems to be thoroughly afraid of Vetala and his attendants, as is clear to anyone who reads discriminatingly such a work as the *Katha Sarit Sagara*.

The Vetala temples are probably part of that culture which built the stone circles and their attached barrows which are found in many parts of the Deccan and of the Central Provinces and on the Nilgherry hills. These remains are undoubtedly of the same class as those spread over lands to the west, Arabia, North Africa, France, England, Ireland, Scotland. Is it possible that the white colour daubed on those stones where worship persists is a kind of memory of the people who brought this megalithic culture to India?

Belief in possession by demons and the spirits of the dead encourages an order of sorcerers and exorcists. These are known as *bhagata*, *devarishi*, *panchakshari* and belong to all classes. They are specially the devotees of Vetala, for they need his help many a time to exorcise an evil spirit.

The whitewash applied to the Vetala stones has more significance than just a folk memory of the origin of this culture. The cane which drives out a spirit is *pandhari*, the name for the village community is *Ai pandhaa*. May not these again be related to the name, Pandurang, one of the names of Vithoba of Pandhari? But setting such hypotheses aside there still remains the inference that the Mahar's special function in the worship of Vetala marks him as of ancient and of authoritative lineage.

The mind of the Mahar regarding himself is expressed in the legends which he cherishes. Some of those folk-stories are connected with the rights of the Mahar in the village economy. It is believed that these rights were bestowed for faithfulness shown in the following circumstances. A certain Moslem king went forth to hunt, leaving his wife behind in their tent. There was a watchman on guard over the tent. This man fearing lest he might be accused of sexual intrigues with the woman, made himself an eunuch and locked in the treasure chest the proof of his chastity. The king on his return had a fit of jealousy, and doubted the faithfulness of



his wife. His suspicion extended to the watchman. But the accused was able to establish his innocence and that of the queen by handing the keys of the treasure chest to his master. The king was convinced of the man's faithfulness and as a reward granted him the fifty-two rights adding the title, *mahavira*, which in time became Mahar.

A similar legend gleaned from the Mahars of Poona explains the fall of the people from the esteem of the mighty. They say that it was during the Peshwa rule that they were subjected to the degrading necessity of wearing a black cord round their neck with a spittoon slung in front and a wild plum bush trailing on the ground behind them. The occasion for this oppressive enactment by the Peshwa was as follows: A Mahar youth named Ganapati who used to be one of the guards over the Shaniwar Palace in Poona, was fair and elegant to look on. One of the ladies of the palace carried on intrigues with him. The misconduct was discovered, and the Peshwa put the guard to death. The ghost of the dead man kept appearing to the prince in his dreams, and would give him no peace until he made an effigy of the Mahar in the form of the god, Ganapati, and set it up at the Eastern entrance to the palace where all would do obeisance to the Mahar's name. The ghost was laid by this means; but the Peshwa extended his wrath to the whole Mahar caste, and he forbade them entrance to his capital city at hours when their shadows might fall on men of high degree; and when they did appear they were required to have the signs of their degradation clinging to them.

A number of the folk legends are connected with the meaning of the name Mahar. The following legend I got from a man of seventy-two, the last but one of a family of twenty whose mother died at the age of one hundred and ten years. Parvati, the goddess of the hills, was bathing one day, and set her jewels on a ledge or on a peg in the wall of the bathroom. A crow, unseen by the lady, carried them away to a high tree nearby. The jewels were missed when the bather began to dress. The watchman of the palace was charged with the theft. Mahadeva, Parvati's husband, ordered the accused to be cut in pieces. The poor man, loud in his protestations of innocence, charged the king with lack

of justice. He offered to prove his innocence by finding the jewels and pointing out the thief. The king relented and gave him the chance he sought. The watchman had seen a crow fly to his nest in a tree with the necklace. When one climbed into the tree the necklace was found. The queen giving way to contrition instead of anger asked the watchman to take the name of the great necklace, the Maha Har. His descendants were honoured watchmen ever after and kept the name, Mahar, in remembrance of their honest ancestor.

A less complimentary story is to the effect that the Mahars are descended from one of the four sons of the cow. The mother asked her sons how they proposed to honour her after her death. Three of them said that they would give her divine honours. The fourth answered her that as she had borne him in her body, so would he carry her in his. The other sons were astounded at his impiety, and they exclaimed *maha ahar*, that is, great appetite. The name, Mahar, thus clung to him and his descendants; for he and they have kept the vow until this day in their eating of beef.

The folk imagination stimulated by the feeling of inferiority turns unashamed to idealisation wherever there is undoubted ground for self-praise. That ground is afforded by a group of Mahar poets who flourished in the fourteenth century. One of the most elaborate of the folk legends is attributed to the poet, Namadeva, who was himself of the Tailor caste. It gives an account of the birth of Chokhamela, the chief of the saintly Mahar group. It runs as follows: In Koregaon there lived a patil, a good man who was whole-hearted in his devotion to Vithoba. He used to make an offering of his first fruits to the God of Gods before he laid by a store for himself. From his mangoes just grown ripe he selected the sweetest to the number of one hundred and twenty-five; and, making them into two loads he engaged a Mahar as porter, for there was no other to carry them. The Mahar took with him his wife, a virtuous woman; and they carried the burdens on their heads to Pandhari which was four miles distant. As they were making the outskirts of Pandhari there met them an aged man with shaky chin. He leaned upon a staff as he walked unsteadily. Being hungry he besought the Mahar earnestly to put a mango into his

hand. The Mahar answered, 'Sir, the mangoes belong to the patil, and they are addressed to the chief priest of the temple. I am only a porter who have no right to take or give.' So saying the Mahar passed on, and his wife came behind him. Of her the hungry man besought a mango. Hearing his plaint she decided to give him one, thinking the act no evil since the giving was to a hungry man. Selecting a good one she handed it to him and he received it. Putting it to his mouth and sucking it he found it bitter and returned it to her. She, honest woman, would not replace it in the basket, so she tucked it away in the lap of her dress. The Mahar and his wife reached Pandhari, and they gave the loads to the person to whom they were addressed. 'One hundred and twenty-four. One is missing,' said the man to the priest. He began to enquire of his wife how the mango had been taken away. She said, 'Sir, I gave it to the Brahman. Having tasted it he was not satisfied with it, so I tucked it away in the folds of my dress.' Then the priests of Pandhari, shepherds of the people, looked; and lo, the mango had become a child. 'Twas God who sucked the fruit. How can we speak of the trick he played?' And so they named the child Chokhamela (the sucked one). Nama says, 'The trick is blessed and beyond compare: God takes pity on his faithful.'

There is a variation of this birth-story. The parents were named Sudama and Muktabai; and they lived at Anugad. They were childless, though Sudama made many pilgrimages to Pandhari to procure the gift of a son. In his absence Muktabai had to carry two hundred mangoes to the Musulman governor of Bedar. A Brahman asked her for some of the fruit. She gave him five mangoes which he accepted. In return he imparted his blessing saying that she would have five children. The eldest one was to be called Chokhamela. When she reached Bedar it was found that there were two hundred and five mangoes. Thus was it proved that the person who met her in the guise of a Brahman was no other than Vithoba, the god who gives double.

Among the poems attributed to Wanka, a brother-in-law of Chokhoba and also his disciple, there occurs a group of poems wherein a miraculous birth-story is related regarding

Soyrabai, the wife of Chokhoba. She was meditating always upon the Name. She had been married for a long time, but she had no child. Sitting in loneliness she was remembering the Lord of Pandhari, and she said, 'Why, O Narayana, hast thou forgotten me? My heart is pained because there is no heir in my family.' The Lord of Pandhari laughed in his mind as he listened; and he told Soyrabai's story to his wife, Rukhmini. Saith Wanka, What will Vitthal do? Narayana came to the house of Chokha in guise as a Brahman advanced in years. Standing near the tulasi plant in front of the hut, he enquired whose home it was and how the children were. Thereat the eyes of Soyrabai filled with loving tears. She answered that the master of the house was entranced by Vithoba and that he found not one particle of delight in worldly pleasure. 'I have never conceived a child,' she said; 'and my life is empty.' The Lord of Pandhari begged for food to assuage the pangs of hunger, contracted on a long journey. The lady answered that they were Mahars, low of caste, and how could she think of such a thing. The other said, 'See, my life is going; caste is naught to me; give me a crumb of some food.' Soyra considered in her mind, 'This old Brahman may be deaf, and he does not understand what I am saying. If I feed him in these circumstances the folk will beat me.' Once more she told him that they were Mahars, and that folk would blame her for feeding a great man of high degree. The other answered that caste mattered naught to him. 'Give me food,' he said, 'and save my life. Look not ahead to what may happen.' Thereupon Soyrabai brought forth a dish full of curds and rice, and gave it into his hand. Wanka says that the Saviour ate and was satisfied and said to Soyrabai. 'Ask of me and I will give thee.' She answered, 'Lord, what can'st thou give to me? My lot is to partake of leavings. Let the gift of thy mercy be upon us. 'Tis that is dear to us, O God.' The other said, 'Take a mouthful from my hand, 'twill become a child within thee.' When she heard this she prostrated herself and worshipped his feet in faith. At that moment Chokhoba returned home, and Soyrabai told him the story laying her head at his feet. The days passed and Soyrabai conceived and bare a son to whom they gave the name, Karmamela.

A variation of the birth-story of Karmamela has been given already to illustrate the birth ceremonies in the home of a Mahar.<sup>1</sup>

Over the name of Namadeva there is preserved a legend which illustrates God's care for his faithful when they are persecuted. Chokhamela was accused by a Brahman of blaspheming the Holy Name by taking it presumptuously on his polluted lips, and of feeding the God with curds. The Mahar was hailed before the magistrate. 'He has defiled Vithoba,' said the accusers. 'Yoke the bullocks that he may be put to death by being torn asunder,' ordered the guardian of justice. Having bound Chokhoba by the feet they urged the bullocks on. The whip fell on the backs of the animals. They struggled to advance; but their distorted mouths showed that they were being held in check by some unseen hand. Chokha's wife was standing by, and she cried, 'O Divine king, stay their hand. Thou hast eaten with this man; and is this thy return to him? They are trying to kill the husband of the weak. Thou hast betrayed Chokha. Take off their hands and repay the loans made.' Chokha said to her, 'O shameless one, the Upholder of the world, my Vithu is manifest to his saints.' At this her eyes were opened, and she saw as her husband did that the wearer of the robe of yellow silk, the form of the colour of a dark cloud, was holding the bullocks by the nose in order to save his saint.

Ekanath, a Brahman poet saint of the middle of the sixteenth century, preserves in connexion with the name of Chokhamela a legend which seems to illustrate a feud between Brahmanism and the religion of Grace centred in Pandharpur. Ekanath himself was a friend of the outcastes, and he entertained a party of Mahars to dinner in his house. The story which illustrates the religious feud extends over eight *abhangas*, but it is a unity. It runs as follows in literal translation:—'In heaven the nectar was beginning to turn sour, and the Lord of the immortals was distressed. The Lord of the immortals addressed a question to Narada—"Where can this nectar be purified?"' The sage answered, "Shall I tell thee of a new thing on the earth? At the door of

<sup>1</sup> Chap. iii.

Pundalik stands on a brick the god who is Lord of the helpless. To me, Ekajanardhana, he is a store of beauty."

'Narada the sage tells the story of Pandhari. "God is dancing as the saints are performing a *kirtana* (a song sermon in praise of the Name). To the sounding of the Name the saints are dancing. What are the heavenly ones compared with these? There is nothing like this to be seen in the three worlds. Behold Pandhari is the market where salvation may be had." The Lord of the immortals was pleased in his mind as he listened. Narada told this, says Ekajanardhana. "If you go there the nectar will become pure." So said Narada. At that time the eleventh day of the moon fell on a Monday, and the sky-car of Indra descended. Indra came bearing a platter of nectar. The heavenly ones thundered in acclamation. As the heavenly gods came to Pandhari, Nama was leading the kirtana. The heavenly gods sat listening as Nama danced in the kirtana. Ekajanardhana says, Lord Indra and the gods forsaking heaven came to the kirtana.

'Chokha was in his house when this crowd gathered on the sands of Chandrabhaga. The two (he and his wife) were preparing the vows of the eleventh day, fasting and keeping awake at night. For three watches the wake of fasting was going on. Then Chokhamela said to his wife, "God has intimated to me that he will come to dine with us in the morning." Ekajanardhana says, Chokha prayed for mercy and God was moved to pity. Listening to Chokha's prayer for mercy God came to breakfast. Along with Namadeva came all the hosts of Gandharvas, Indra and all the Gods. Narada went to Chokha and said to him, "God is coming to thy house." Abundance and plenty came to the house of Chokha. The preparations for dinner were made. The dweller at Pandhari hastened to the house of Chokha along with Rukhmini. Chokhamela went and fell prostrate at his feet, and God raised him and embraced him. Ekajanardhana says, God seeing the faith of Chokhamela came to dine with him. They sat in rows in the court of Chokha's home and Chokha's wife served the dinner. Indra brought the plate of nectar before Narayana and urged him to purify it. Then the Lord God asked Chokhoba to haste and purify the nectar. What is nectar compared with the name? Indra has brought

a plate of nectar with the purpose of having it quickly purified. Chokha's wife and Chokha, these two, behold they made the nectar pure: in Chokha's house nectar became pure. How can I, Ekajanardhana, tell the story?

'Rows of diners sat in Chokha's yard, and the wielder of the bow dined happily. With Namadeva were all the Ganas and Gandharvas, Indra and the other Gods, and the sage, Narada. Chokha joining both his hands said, "Ye have made the lowly one holy. I am a Mahar, low of birth and unclean. Ye have shown me mercy. Some Brahmans of Pandhari will see this, they do not show me any favour." Hearing this they all laughed and Gopala smiled with joy. Having distributed pansupari the God (Vithoba) bade them farewell. So Indra and the others went to their own place. The Brahmans of Pandhari persecuted Chokha, but Narayana delivered him. Ekajanardhana says, such is the story of Chokhamela when the Lord of Pandhari gave a dinner at his house.'

Buddhism made the birth story or Jataka a popular form of literature and the Chokhamela birth-stories may owe something to Buddhist influences; but the doctrine of grace, if indebted to Buddhism, can only derive from the Hinayana school. But this doctrine of grace may be explained as a natural development of the ancient Bhagavata Dharma to which Hinayana Buddhism may be itself a debtor. It is no wonder that Mahipati, a poet biographer of the saints, writing in the eighteenth century, mentions the fact that in the ancient abhangas it is said that caste distinction was not observed at Pandharpur.<sup>1</sup> Not only is it maintained in the folk memory that God and his true saints are not respectors of persons, but the chief God of the Vedic religion has something to receive from the Saviour of men whose shrine is at Pandharpur. And the most astounding reach of the folk imagination is the belief that the king of gods and men needs a Mahar saint for the fulfilment of his purpose. Indeed throughout the poetry of the saints who worship Pandurang, there recurs again and again the notion that the way of salvation which they follow is unknown to Brahma and the Vedic gods.

<sup>1</sup> *Bhaktavijaya*, xl, 66.

## CHAPTER VII

### THE MAHAR PART IN MARATHI POETRY

IN the thirteenth and the fourteenth centuries there was a group of poets of saintly memory clustered round the feet of Vithoba of Pandharpur. Janabai, one of the sweetest of the Marathi singers, who herself might well be counted one of the brightest gems in that cluster, describes the group as a family of which Vithoba is the head:

Lo, Vithu guised as householder  
With a crowd of children round him.  
Nivritti upon his shoulder,  
Sopan holds a hand beside him.  
Right in front proceeds Dnyaneshwar,  
Muktai, the fair doth follow.  
Chokhoba and Gora Potter  
On his either side are carried.  
Wanka straddles on his back,  
In his bosom Nama nestles.  
Gopala holds a festive season  
For his saints, saith Nama's Jani.

From the point of view of modern orthodox Brahmanism it is a very remarkable group; and the wonder of it increases as the generations pass adding such names as Bhanudas, Ekanath, Tukaram, Mahipati. How is it that the untouchable Mahars Chokhoba and Wanka are there at all?

It is a matter of even greater wonder that a people out-caste, despised and neglected, as the Mahars have been for centuries, should have produced poetry such as bears the names of Chokhoba and his wife Soyraibai, of Nirmala the sister of Chokha, of Wanka, his brother-in-law and of Karmamela, his son. But some of God's fairest flowers bloom on the rubbish heaps cast forth by men: it has happened again and again that the stone rejected of the



builders is that which is needed as the keystone of the arch. The fact which arouses wonder is not so much the gathering of the Mahars at the feet of the Lord of the lowly, and not even the blossoming of the Mahar mind into poetry, but the degree to which the chief of these Mahar poets is praised by his successors in the Vaishnava School of Pandharpur. The name of Chokhoba is more frequently found and more exalted than even that of Dnyanoba so far as the literature is concerned, though in the mouths of modern pilgrims to Pandhari the chief names are Dnyanoba and Tukaram.

The wonder needs explanation. Whatever the full explanation may be, and there are, doubtless, many elements in it, there can be no doubt that significance has to be given to at least three or four considerations. The chief of these is the very remarkable religious movement which centres at Pandharpur, the worship of the god, Pandurang. But for the character of that god, however he be named, it would be impossible for a Mahar to attain that freedom of utterance and that place in the heart of the great Maratha people which Chokhamela occupies. There remains, of course, the explanation of this explanation itself, the tracing of the roots of this faith.

As the character of the Lord of Pandhari is the chief factor in the solution of this problem, so the consideration next in importance must be the character and the religious experience of the saint himself. If his fame rested only on the quality of his poetry, his name should have been mentioned less frequently than that of Dnyanoba who is first of Marathi poets in literary skill and achievement, as he is in time. It must have been the saintliness of Chokhoba's personality that impressed the religious society in which he moved, and his moral achievement surmounting the disadvantages of his birth and social standing, redounded to the praise of Pandurang. Chokha is an eminent example of the power of God's grace. That grace had been magnified in Azamela and other sinners of outcaste origin. But those did not possess the added gift of song. It should be added further that Chokha's influence on the Vaishnava mind is due to a fact which is true of Tukaram in a later generation, their speech being that of the common folk probably exercised a more potent

influence on a popular religious movement than the more learned and polished language of the Brahman culture in Dnyanoba and his brethren. Moreover the thought of Chokhoba is more intensely devotional than that of his contemporaries. Just as she who was forgiven much loved much, so Chokhoba and Soyrabai, having felt most intensely the weight of the chains which bound them in the Brahmanical order of caste, rejoiced most fully in the freedom which the Saviour gave them by his grace. It is on this account that they deserve a foremost place as prophets of the doctrine that salvation is by faith, a faith generated by God's free grace. It is this which is recognised chiefly in the writings of their successors. Janabai expresses aptly what the general Marathi mind feels:

Low of birth was Chokhamela,  
Yet the God who sheweth mercy  
On all saints became his helper,  
Dwelling as a guest and friendly  
In the cottage of the lowly.

. . . . .

Famous as a saint was Chokha.  
God was much enamoured of him.  
Whoso showeth great devotion  
Him doth God assist in danger.  
Chokhamela gained such power  
That e'en God became his debtor.  
Lay firm hold, saith Nama's Jani,  
On the lotus feet of Vitthal.

. . . . .

Chokha though a nameless outcaste  
Stood a king among the saintly.

. . . . .

Take the name of Vitthu with you  
As ye go upon a journey.  
Mighty is the name to save you:  
Many have been rescued by it.  
Azamela was uplifted,  
Chokhamela gained his freedom.  
Nama's Jani saith, when grinding  
And when husking it hath helped me.

In all the praises of Chokhoba there are inwoven strands of legend. But attributed to the name of Namadeva there is a lament over Chokha's death which for poignancy compares

with that of David over Jonathan. This verse must have been composed by one who knew and loved the subject of it in real life. He describes how Mahars were summoned to build a wall round the town of Mangalvedha. Chokhoba was one of the labourers. The work went on for four months when the wall gave way suddenly crushing many Mahars under it. Chokha was one of those who died thus. The calamity happened in the Shalivahana year 1260, that is in the year 1338 of the Christian era. Namadeva gathered the remains of Chokha and buried them over against the great door of the temple in Pandharpur amid the praises of the Name. In the midst of this narrative he bursts out in praise of his friend.

My very life is Chokhoba.  
My being's root is he.  
My Stock and moral code and God  
Is Chokhoba to me.

What tongue can tell his loving faith?  
What lips his might declare?  
'Twas for his sake that I have come  
The life of man to share.

The poet's conceit is that the God of Pandhari is speaking of Chokha in the person of the poet.

There are three hundred and fifty poems and more attributed to Chokhamela. His wife has credit for about sixty. Wanka has about forty. Nirmala has twenty-four. Karmamela has not more than thirty. All of these cannot be authentic; for here and there one finds clear evidence that the author was later in date and less skilful in composition than Chokha himself. The usual Marathi abhanga formula by which the author inserts his own name in the penultimate line can be no test of authorship: it is easy enough for any writer to pass off his composition under some well known name. It is unfortunate that this should be so. But the pity of it applies to the work of all the great Marathi poets. 'Nama says' or Tuka or 'Chokha says'—any village bard can weave those great names into his compositions, and so not really dishonestly and perhaps unwittingly, he lends himself to the confusion of the scholar and the misleading of the simple. So while endeavouring to get as near as possible

to Chokhamela, we recognise that we are really dealing with the works of a school of poets who belonged to the great Mahar folk. The inspiration of the school is the chief member of it. The head and body together give us a revelation of the soul of this nameless people rising above an unkind fate through the grace of God.

Only the hypothesis that under the name of Chokhoba there is a school of poets writing from generation to generation can explain partly the curious appearance that the Mahar mind seems to have burst into memorable verse only at the beginning of the fourteenth century. That was certainly a remarkable century in Maharashtra as in Europe. But there were great spiritual awakenings in other ages also; and in those later years there must have been promptings of the spirit that urged intelligent Mahars to sing. The compositions of later poets who assume the name of Chokhoba are revealed by references to poets who lived much later than Chokhoba and by words that can have entered the Marathi language only well after the Moghal rulers had brought Persian and Arabic words into the language of everyday life. In regard to this last matter, however, it has to be borne in mind that the oral transmission or the manuscript copying of the old poems encouraged the modification of old words into newer forms, and at times the substitution of a modern expression for one that had grown obsolete.

The praise of God's Name and Attributes is the chief theme of all these saintly poets. It is no wonder that an outcaste thinks of God thus:

The orphan's advocate, the poor man's friend,  
The burden bearer of all helpless folk,  
He, the Great King, on Chandrabhaga's sands  
Abides to render service to his saints.  
In very truth he ne'er forgets the man  
Who takes him at his word. 'Tis Chokha saith  
My loving Mother stands upon the brick.

There is often a play upon the name, Vithoba. The Marathi word for a brick is *vita*: and there is a legend to the effect that God once paid a visit to a saint named Pundalik at a moment when the saint was busy in pious duty to his father. Thinking the visitor to be an ordinary man, Pundalik

without looking passed to him a brick on which he might sit. The Divine being rejoiced in mercy rather than in sacrifice and appropriated Pundalik's brick as his normal place of rest. This reference recurs again and again :

The Lord of whom the Vedic scriptures tell,  
Husband of Rama, lives at Pandharpur.  
He erst beside the sea of milk did dwell,  
Now standing on a brick at Pandharpur  
He lifts his hand to give a store of joy  
And blessed freedom to the men of faith.  
With equal eye he looks on high and low ;  
Outcastes and women gather at his feet.  
'Tis Chokha saith, his love of faith in men  
Hath brought him to abide on Bhima's shore.

All the Marathi poets, however spiritual they may be, show a constant tendency to regard God as revealed or rather as presented to sense by an image. Idolatry seems inseparable from their mind. So Chokha says :

Of his own will and sweet accord  
He came and stood upon the brick.  
His image there in hands divine  
Upholds the conch, the disc, the mace,  
And lotus.  
A diadem and ear-rings twain,  
A five gemmed necklace and a string  
Of prayer beads, a golden cloth  
All striped and bright, irradiate  
The gloom around. Saith Chokhoba  
Abode of bliss, compelling, fair.

There are poems, however, in which the note is throughout spiritual. No thinking Indian ever conceives the idol as anything but a crude means of concentrating the mind upon the pure Spirit. And thus in Chokha we find poems of this type :

Of plenteous grace and mercy manifold  
Thou understandest, Lover of thy saints.  
Nor birth, nor wealth, nor lineage to Thee  
Are aught. Wherefore my one care is this,  
Simply to lay my head upon Thy feet.  
'Tis not because men pray, but of free will  
Thou art their burden bearer and dost give  
Salvation free to all who live by faith.  
Thus, Chokha saith, Hari is wonderful,  
His vision banisheth all worldly fear.

At times the reference to the image is so slight that one may overlook it in attention to the spiritual meaning :

Forsaking heaven through love for saints  
 At Pandhari Thou hast thy dwelling made,  
 O Lord Hari most kind and great of heart.  
 Thy Name unique doth save the sons of men.  
 Upon Thine arm Thou bindst the badge of rank,  
 And on thy feet an anklet. All three worlds  
 Are Thine by right; and yet at Pandhari  
 Thou dost abide. Our Advocate art Thou.  
 Saith Chokha, When Thy Name upon our lips  
 Doth dwell, we reck not aught of day or hour.

As in the preceding poem revelation seems impossible to the Indian unless it have an element that presents the attributes of God to the senses, so in this last one the notion of a descent of God into human life seems inconceivable apart from a dwelling in a particular place.

In quite a number of Chokhoba's poems, as in those of Ekanath, one is aware that he is following a religion which is not ordinary Brahmanism. And by ordinary Brahmanism one means that religion which derives from the Vedic Scriptures and is taught and preserved by the Brahmanical priesthood.

Though full of knowledge He became a boor,  
 And all his joy he sought amid the saints.  
 Behold, how great a wonder is this truth  
 Hidden from Brahman and the other gods.  
 Hari the mighty stands at Pandharpur,  
 Though all the glory of the worlds be his.  
 A mother's house to all the humble folk  
 Is Pandhari upon the Bhima's shore.

The same thought is repeated thus :

Lord Hari, He of Vaikuntha, benign,  
 His wonders hath performed most manifold.  
 A mighty king is he, Lord Vithoba,  
 Who stands by Chandrabhaga on a brick.  
 He yearns for love and pines for faith of men,  
 A kind of sport unknown to gods like Brahmn.  
 Lo, this is he who dwells at Pandharpur,  
 Whose vision gracious saves the sons of men.

This faith is also different from that of the Yogis who seek salvation through the practice of self-mastery :

The Yogis labour all in vain  
 To gain the joy of Pundalik,  
 A bliss through love and faith attained  
 Most easily at Pandhari.  
 With hands upon his hips he stood  
 Behind his faithful worshipper.  
 The ages come, the ages go  
 Yet change comes not to Vithoba.  
 Thus Chokha saith, The Lord is kind,  
 His praise is sounded everywhere.

The vanity of works is emphasised over and over again: no man can save himself by his own efforts.

All striving is unblest  
 Just let me take thy name.  
 Its joy within my breast  
 Is all the good I claim.  
 This be my simple task,  
 My heart's desire, to lie  
 At Keshava's feet and ask  
 That having come to die  
 It may be my good lot  
 To start my life anew  
 As child in saintly cot  
 I to whom naught is due  
 But leavings of man's food,  
 Count this my highest good,  
 A beggar at thy door.  
 I lie and make my plaint.  
 Thou giver to the poor,  
 Drive not away thy saint.  
 My wretchedness remove  
 Thou Lord of Rakhma's love.

The saint is worried by more than social inequality and weakness. His soul gets weary under a load of sin, and he finds relief in God alone.

I ran a fugitive to God  
 Driving all doubt from out my breast.  
 My deeds a load upon my back,  
 I nowhere got me any rest.  
 To none can I apportion blame.  
 My foes have caught me in their net.  
 In miry clay, so Chokha saith,  
 All unawares my feet I set.  
 O Thou who dwell'st at Pandhari  
 'Tis only Thou can'st set me free.

God is worthy of trust: the saints in all ages have found him a sure refuge:

Full many a saint in days gone by  
In supplication came to Thee.  
Thou did'st their sinful burden bear.  
And now Thy mercy show to me.  
No right have I, an outcaste poor,  
Save to the leavings on Thy board.  
'Tis Chokha all perplexed who pleads,  
Grant me Thy Name's protection, Lord.

The poet cannot cease wondering at the plenitude of God's grace which is manifested in his humiliation and in his service of the saints.

What kind of joy was that which moved  
The mind of Parabrahman high  
That he, unmindful of his rank,  
Should come to mortal men anigh?  
With them he did a cov'nant make.  
Wonder of wonders, Chokha saith,  
The formless One a form did take.  
The God of gods a madness hath.

The gracious God finds delight in the trust which men put in him. This need on God's part of human love and trust explains his coming down to enter into human life.

Replete is he with great desire  
And longing for the faith of men.  
He stands and waits at Pandhari  
In love surpassing human ken.  
Immersed in faith my heart is glad.  
Idle I stand, my will distraught.  
'Tis faith that gives him sweetest joy;  
Yea, pride and colour please him naught. .

'Tis Chokhoba who sees in him  
A mother most compassionate,  
Making a shelter kind and cool  
To cover all the desolate.

This state of fixed faith in God has been reached after an experience of wandering from shrine to shrine in search of peace, a wandering which many have endured in all generations in India.



I roamed afar abroad  
 Yet hath my soul not found  
 A place of fixed abode  
 The sacred streams around.  
 To all the forms divine  
 Of which I heard I sought,  
 Yet dire distress and dwine  
 Was all my wanderings brought.  
 I Chokha turned mine eyes  
 To Pandhari at last.  
 There earth hath reached the skies,  
 There all dispeace is past.

The gloomy shadow of the Law of Karma often lies thick upon the poet's soul. This is the law which enjoins on every being to dree his weird. In this gloom Chokha is perplexed:

Not for me is honour or dishonour.  
 To pain or pleasure stored up in my deeds  
 I lay no claim. But somehow from desire  
 Hath been begotten for me quite a heap.  
 Both birth and death have in my lap been bound,  
 And hence of fruitless ardour am I full,  
 That so in me the Law may be fulfilled,  
 And Chokha pass his days in grief and woe.

Coming after the joy and brightness of his trust in God this seems very like the dark night of the soul, an experience which most saints have had. Apart from the darkness which falls naturally upon every true soul there is a gloom which clings close to the social order in which the Mahar finds himself. He finds it a very hopeless thing to be a Mahar with no light upon his way save that which glimmers from the Brahmanical faith. Chokha would not be human and sincere, if he did not offer some protest.

- O God why lay on me those chains?  
 From this my puzzle set me free.  
 Thy Name's great might I fain would know,  
 Within my heart its glory see.  
 My birth in very low estate  
 Doth leave me no authority.  
 My neighbours put me far apart;  
 I am cast in great perplexity.  
 Saith Chokha, In this human form  
 What can I do? what can I be?

The woman's heart of Soyraibai is perhaps more sensitive to the ills and arrows of stern fate than that of her husband.

She feels the bitterness of her lot, and finds her consolation in resignation to the will of the good Lord.

Haste thee, O Vitthala, haste thee to succour me.  
Come, I beseech thee, abide at my side.  
What is the thought of my heart O my Keshava?  
Father and Mother God Thou wilt provide.  
Now at whose house shall I look for a dwelling place?  
All things seem utterly desert and bare.  
Soyara saith, Behold Pandhari's Majesty,  
Let me depend on Thy mercy and care.

In another abhanga her plaint is in the same strain:

When our state is hopeless, utterly confounded,  
Who within his bosom folds us kindly?  
Thou alone dost shelter, there is none beside Thee  
Who can truly be our sure protection.  
Whate'er to Thee may seem the best, that good perform.  
This prayer do I always lift to Thee.  
Soyarabai is saying, My life and breath art Thou.  
Then whither can I wend except to Thee?

While these saints are complaining of the bitterness of their lot they realise that they are their own worst enemies, and they confess the lust and wrath and enmity which cling to them. Their hope is that God, the gentle Mother, will overlook their faults, and they accept in resignation whatever the good will enjoins.

Whate'er to thee may seem aright  
Of good or ill to me is sweet.  
The obligation which I owe  
I lay as offering at thy feet.  
The story of my life in full  
Before thy presence I confess.  
Soyara declares, Of all my kin  
'Tis Thou alone hast will to bless.

And in another abhanga she continues:

Thou only art my God and King.  
My mind is fixed upon thy feet.  
No other work than this I know,  
To sit a beggar all unmeet,  
And sing Thy Name, Thy Mercy laud.  
Yea, at Thy door I sit and call  
On Thee, says Chokha's Mahari.

The figure of the outcaste sitting on the door step and begging for the leavings of food that sometimes are thrown

out for the crows and the dogs, could only be used of himself by a Mahar or a sweeper. Soyrabai uses the figure with fulness of meaning.

What other can avert my lot of good and ill  
 But Thou alone, Hari, Mother-Father?  
 Clinging to the hope of sharing in thy leavings  
 I sit both day and night and ply the beggar's trade;  
 In thy heart only wells for us the fount of love.  
 Lust, envy, wrath and spite, anger and enmity  
 That make our burden hard, do thou from us avert.  
 This be my plea, Father and Mother God,  
 These be the words of Soyara, Chokha's bride.

These words are more than the utterance of any individual. It is the spirit of the people crying out for salvation. And surely the spirit of a people that can produce minds like those of the poets whom we have studied in part, is worthy of salvation, that salvation which consists in an abiding place in the Father's home.

## CHAPTER VIII

### EPILOGUE

‘WHO hath believed our report? and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed? . . . He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not.’ These words were applied by a Hebrew poet to the spirit of his own people when it was in exile. And a later prophet of the same race contemplating his people scattered in a foreign land in virtual slavery conceives the following allegory:—‘The hand of the Lord was upon me, and carried me out in the spirit of the Lord, and set me down in the midst of the valley which was full of bones, and caused me to pass by them round about: and, behold, there were very many in the open valley; and, lo, they were very dry. . . . And he said unto me, Son of man, can these bones live? And I answered, O Lord God, Thou knowest.’ The allegory goes on to say how God commanded him to prophesy unto those dry bones. And when he did so they came together bone to his bone and sinews and flesh grew upon them and skin covered their forms; ‘but there was no life in them. Then said he unto me, Prophesy unto the wind, prophesy, Son of man and say to the wind, Thus saith the Lord God; Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live. So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them; and they lived, and stood up upon their feet, an exceeding great army.’

That Hebrew prophecy is not yet fully complete, for the ways of men in history are slow. They are slow because men are hard of heart and slow to believe what God hath prepared for their salvation.

The student of Marathi devotional verse does not read far

in it without receiving the impression that the doctrine of the Name is of supreme importance in the minds of the writers. There is also the impression that there is a Name above every other Name. A considerable amount of confusion regarding this Name of names may be attributed to the multiplicity of sects that remember only imperfectly an ancient tradition. In their memories they are as men that sleep.

The names of God which occur in the Mahar poets breathe an intensity of need and lowliness which is less marked in the other poets of the Pandharpur schools. In the poems attributed to Dnyanoba, Nivrutti, Sopandeva and Muktabai the atmosphere is more intellectual, more doctrinal than emotional and practical. In the Mahar poets the atmosphere, though similar doctrinally, is yet charged with a special warmth. The names of God which recur most frequently are these—the Giver, or Lord, He who gives double, the Most Merciful, the Most Gracious, the Lover, He who has many aspects, the Generous, the Advocate, the Compassionate Little Mother, the Gracious Shadow, the Orphan's Helper, the Bearer of the Orphan's burden, the Lord of the lowly, the Burden-bearer, the Father and Mother, the Receiver of the sinful. These are epithets added to other ancient and common names which were themselves at the beginning of their use just epithets or descriptive terms. The commonest of these are Hari, Narayana, Vitthala. Pandurang is so distinctive of the god of Pandhari that it may be regarded as a personal name, though originally it also must have been just a descriptive term.

The essence of the doctrine of the Name is that God in his very person is present in the Name. The Name is not simply a sound: it is a power. Whoso uses the Name in truth is not simply repeating a formula, he is appropriating and identifying with himself a divine power. As Namadeva says in one place, 'The Name is the Form, the Form is the Name; the Name is in no way separate from the form. God took shape and became incarnate as the Name. Therefore the altar of the Name was set up.'

It is only a small remnant of the Mahar people who have adopted this high religion of Pandharpur. Therefore a study of that religion in its multiple aspects is hardly

pertinent to a study of the Mahars. But there is a question connected with the origin and the early development of the worship of Pandurang or of Vitthala which is not unrelated to the early history of the Mahar folk. The question concerns the meaning of the names Vitthala and Pandurang. Molesworth preserves a popular hypothesis relating to the meaning of the name, Vitthala. According to this interpretation he is 'the receiver of the ignorant and the destitute of understanding.'

There can be no doubt that the god Vitthala has this character not only in the psalms of praise which the saints have composed at his feet but also in the ceremonies which continue to the present day at Gopalpur which is connected with the present temple in a distant way. There is evidence to show that the present temple in Pandharpur which houses the rude image named Vithoba is not the original temple of that religious centre. The temple of the present day is probably a Brahmanical imposition upon an earlier worship in which there was no respecting of persons according to their colour. There is evidence of a parallel change of religion in the temples of the god Khandoba at Jejuri and at other spots in the Poona district. It was manifestly the policy of the Brahmans to incorporate the earlier gods and cults. They did this to Buddhism as everyone knows.

The process of incorporation was not simply a carrying over of ideas of shrines and of divine names. That was done in plenty; but it seems that in some cases they reformed the ancient religion by building a new temple where the elements of the old religion which conflicted with Brahman social notions were kept outside to be practised as a permitted rite in the old places of worship.

May there not be, as some indeed have suggested, a Buddhist element in the religion of Pandhari? This would help to explain the tradition of the ancient psalms and the present practice at Gopalpur which indicated that there was no distinction of birth or colour at that shrine? It would also explain the prominence given to the fellowship of the saints in this religion. It would be consonant with the name, Vitthala, as the receiver of the ignorant. It would finally explain the tendency of the Warkari sect to abjure the use of

flesh as food. Buddhism exercised a great influence in that part of the land where Pandharpur is a centre; and it would be strange indeed if the common people had not felt its uplifting power. The religion of the original people of the land must have been influenced by Buddhism.

In one of the poems of Janabai the Lord of Pandhari is addressed as 'the glory of the Somawanshi.' The Mahars, as we have seen, are described in ancient charters as the eight million Somawanshi. Do these facts together indicate that Pandharpur was a special religious centre for the early tribes which made up the Mahar folk? And if this be so how did the religion of Pandharpur rise above the worship of Mariai and of Vetala to a plane above even early Buddhism, so that a reader of the psalms of the saints cannot help wondering whether there is much difference between the religion of Pandhari at its best and certain elements of Christianity?

All that the faith of Pandharpur at its best has in common with Buddhism it has in common with Christianity; and there are important doctrines which it has in common with Christianity which are not in Buddhism. Christianity holds as an essential doctrine that God is manifest as the Word. Of course the doctrine of the Eternal Word is also a tenet of the best Brahmanism. The Word became incarnate and dwelt among men emptying himself of his glory and becoming a slave. Through faith in his Name, a faith which is engendered by God's free grace, the most sinful men and women are saved. The joy of the Holy Ghost is experienced in the fellowship of the saints. So far the religion of Pandharpur proceeds in the company of Christianity; and it should be added in the company of that line of Indian Theism which culminates in the Church of Ramanujacharya.

But Christianity goes far beyond this. God proves his love to us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. And God proves that it was he himself who as Christ died for us, in that having died he rose again and ascended up into heaven. The fellowship of the saints in the Holy Ghost has thus become a richer and a more potent experience than anything known at Pandharpur. The Risen Christ in the Holy Ghost is in the midst of the Church—'Lo, I am with you to the end of the world.'

It is this experience of the Resurrection power that the prophet, Ezekiel, needed to make his allegory of the dry bones an actual thing and not just a dream.

Another question remains—Why is it that only a remnant of the Mahar folk have given up their sorcery and magic and the worship that is fear while for centuries they have had an offer of full and free salvation in the faith of the saints of Pandharpur? There seems no answer save that implied in the stern word of the Great Master: ‘Straight is the gate and narrow is the way that leadeth into life; and few there be that find it.’

His other word abideth also: ‘Whosoever cometh unto me I will in no wise cast out.’

Salvation cannot be attained simply by the formulation of a social programme or by the adoption of a simple theological creed. The way of salvation and the end thereof is one: it is a fellowship in Holy Spirit, the fellowship which is the very Godhead.



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